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Gentleman Dave, the Dead Game Sport.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER.



JUST THEN THE DEAD GAME SPORT CALLED OUT SHARPLY: "STEADY AS YOU ARE THERE, MISTER MAN, I HAVE YOU LEVEL."

Gentleman Dave.

THE DEAD GAME SPORT;

OR,

The Card Queen of Silver Seam.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "THE KING-PIN TRAMP," "UNCLE
BEDROCK'S BIG BREAK," "GILT-EDGE
JOHNNY," "HURRAH HARRY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FORTUNES OF A TRAVELER.

THE evening was well advanced, and a man was plodding wearily toward the mining-camp of Silverado, the lights of which twinkled in the distance.

He was a well-built, fairly well-dressed young fellow, but just now was worn with a long tramp, and an abstinence from food which might well have taken the strength out of the king-pin of tramps—and Dave Warner was not accustomed to the sort of life he had been leading for the last few days.

"I built better than I knew when I went out with just a grub-stake in my pocket, for the luck still seems to be running the other way," he muttered, as he gazed down the mountain-side.

"That must be Silverado, but if they are waiting there to receive me with a band-wagon and open arms I don't know of it. More likely they have the hole already dug, and are only waiting for the corpse to arrive to proceed with the planting.

"And I don't feel a bit like making it interesting for them."

He turned at what he thought a suspicious sound, though no cover was there within fifty feet of him, where danger might lurk.

"Must be getting nervous," he continued with a low, harsh laugh, and a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"Not likely they would come out this far to meet me on the way; especially as they can't have the ghost of an idea I am coming, and it wouldn't be apt to worry them if they did.

"They say it is a tough camp, and that is about all I know of it. Tough or not, they can make up their minds that down on his luck as he is, if they try to hustle Dave Warner they will find him crowding back till the last horn blows. He wouldn't be Dead Game Dave if he didn't. And when luck does come my way—"

He broke off in his soliloquy, as though he could no longer find words to do the subject justice; and shook his clinched fist back over his shoulder, as though his thoughts had blown toward some one, or something, he had left behind him.

Again there was a slight rustle, though this time it did not reach his ears.

Had his face been turned the other way he might have seen something darting toward him through the air, which looked like a snaky shadow. As a noose settled over his neck he started back, but it was then too late.

The noose tightened, and he was thrown violently to the ground, the jerk wrenching his hand away from the butt of a revolver, toward which it had instinctively darted.

Out from the cover of the nearest bushes darted two men, who flung themselves upon him, as he struggled to rise from the earth.

There was little chance for resistance, even had Warner been in physical condition to make it. In a twinkling his hands were bound behind him, his ankles firmly knotted together, and he was placed upon the broad of his back to look upward at the stars.

"Hyar's yer man, boss!" grated a harsh voice, "but I ain't a-swearin' it's ther right one. You kin see fur yerself, though, an' ef he don't pan out accordin' ter ther law an' prophets, thar's a mighty fine dump-hole not fur down ther road. We kin drap him in an' lay low fur another."

The man addressed as "boss" came striding out from the cover.

Like the others, he was masked, but in addition was disguised by the folds of the large cloak in which he was wrapped.

He made no answer to the address, but looked down at the motionless form which lay at his feet.

There was scarcely light enough to recognize one who might be a comparative stranger. After a brief inspection he spoke in a low tone:

"A match. I can't tell him from Moses in the dark."

The henchman was quick to do his master's bidding. Across the sole of his boot he rubbed the match, and then held the little flare to the face of the captive.

For a moment "the boss" stared downward, taking in every line of the features in sight.

Then he waved his hand, with an impatient gesture.

"It is the wrong man. Take him to the dump, and we'll set the net again."

Without hesitation the two bent forward, and raised the body from the ground.

"String's kinder skeerce. P'rhaps we better knock him in ther head an' save ther pieces fur ther next one. An' I'm a-hopin' he'll be ther right one—don't want ther job ter fill ther dump clean full onless ther's a rise in wages. Ther money ez promised don't call fur too much.

"Dispose of him to suit yourself, so it is done effectually. And waste no time about it. The fellow was a trifle ahead of the hour; but I couldn't afford to run the risks and let him go by, though I was afraid there was something wrong. The other one will be here soon."

"Ez you say. Give him good-by. Et's not like you'll meet him ag'in."

With Dave Warner swinging between them, the two went down the mountain-trail in search of the dump-hole of which they had spoken.

It was not hard to find.

A few rods and they turned sharply to the left. Then a few paces more, and they came upon the abandoned prospect-hole to which they had given the name of dump.

The distance was not great, but they were beyond ear-shot of the spot where Warner had been captured; and the two men eased him down and looked at him, and then at each other.

"He said we should do ther job ter suit ourselves," said one of them, interrogatively.

"That's w'ot."

"An' didn't say ary thing 'bout extry pay fur extry reesk?"

"Nary thing."

"An' coin's w'ot we're arter in this world?"

"Every time."

"Then, stranger, ef you hev wealth, me an' my pard are open fur a dicker. W'ot yer got ter swoop fur yer life?"

Roughly though he had been handled, Dave was not by any means dead, nor past hearing.

The words of the ruffian came to his ears plainly enough, but he made no answer.

"Oh, kim, now! Yer orter know thar's no nonsense 'bout this. It's life er death, jest ez we say; an' ef gelter are outen ther question, we don't keer much which we say. We g'in yer a chance, 'cause we don't think yer hez prezackly hed fair play. Ef you don't take it, all right, an' down yer go. Ketch hold, Bandy!"

The threat brought no more answer than the words which preceded it.

Dave knew the folly of attempting to struggle; he had no coin to purchase his release; and those who knew him best would have been the most ready to aver that Dave Warner would never beg for his life.

"One little more chauce," interposed Bandy, stooping, however, to lay his hand on the shoulder of the stranger.

"We ain't hard men ter deal with. In course we know thar ain't no wealth in yer pockets, 'cause we bin thar. But, we're willin' ter wait. Give yer word fur a thousand, stranger, when it suits yer ter pay it, an' we turn yer loose, arter swearin', ov course, ter keep mum."

"Not a dollar," gritted Dave, between his clinched teeth. "You just waste time when you fool with me. Hold me over the dump-hole, if you want to, and then let go."

"By ther gates ov glory! we will!" exclaimed Bandy, no longer hesitating.

The hands of the two settled on him with a savage strength, and he was tossed out over the edge of the pit without time for another word, and barely space for the cry the two ruffians fully expected to hear him utter.

No cry was there, however!

As they leaned toward the pit they heard the dead thud of a body, striking the wall something like twenty feet below them.

Then, after an interval, which, under the circumstances seemed doubly long, they heard a still duller crash, far down below.

"One thing sure, he war dead game," muttered Bandy, as they turned away.

"Ef he hed hove a yell jest fur good luck it wouldn't hev bin outen ther way. But, not him. He warn't thet style."

"Mighty lucky fur us he panned out an ounce ter ther dish. Ef he hed hove thet yell, an' ther boss hed heared it, an' it hed skeered his game outen his net, I reckon he would 'a' come back at us hard fur not clap-pin' a rag on ther stranger's mouth afore we sent him ter 'j'ine ther innoomerable cary-van,' ez ther poet hath it."

A low whistle interrupted their conversation, and sent them silently and swiftly back to join their leader.

CHAPTER II.

A WOMAN OF NERVE.

"WE heeared him splash; 'nuff 'ced," whispered Bandy as they rejoined "the boss," who was standing on the spot where they had left him.

"Enough of that. Into the bushes with you! In three minutes the time will be up, and the next throw will be for keeps."

Back into hiding went the three men, joining a fourth, who lay in a strangely awkward position on the ground.

"Get yourself into position!" ordered the leader, stirring this man with his foot, his words sounding as harsh as though speaking to a dog.

"One more cast and you save your worthless life, and have coin enough to go on the booze for a month—more than you will be likely to see and feel again as your own in the rest of your life. Set him up, Bandy!"

With a rough wrench Bandy jerked the man into a sitting posture and then covered him with a revolver that he twisted with practiced skill from his belt.

The other fellow stooped, and deftly cast off a rope with which this fourth man had been bound.

"Get your rope ready, and don't be slow about it. There is none too much time to waste if my man is on prompt time."

"Exkuse me, boss," responded the prisoner, as he leisurely coiled up the long rope which stretched out toward the spot where Dave Warner had been standing when noosed.

"I took this hyer job on ther dead level. It war ter be jest a simple hold-up, an' no p'ussanel damidge to nobody. I wants ter know w'ot's become uv that other galoot afore I fling another loop."

"You infernal fool! What is it to you what has become of him? Imagine the worst, and then make up your mind you will land where he went to if you waste another minute. If he don't listen to reason you cut his throat, Bandy; and we will try a thing with a hole in it instead of a rope. It will bring down the game just as well, and if we don't give him a chance to talk he can't tell us any lies. It's rough on the fellow, though. This idiot might save his life."

Had the man with the rope seen and heard the late interview with Dave Warner he might well have imagined this was no idle threat. As it was, he could hardly mistake the savage earnestness in the tones of the leader.

They moved him not a whit, however.

"Sorry, pard. I war on ther beach, ez yer knows, and wantin' ter make a strike, but that wouldn't 'a' bin a indoosement ter reef inter this job ef it hedn't 'a' bin thet my own wu'thless life seemed 'pendin' on it, moreover. You got me foul, an' then give me a blamed poor ch'ice. I done all yer axed fur in ther start, yer got a man ez no other man could 'a' got him, an' now let's play we don't ary more. Ef that don't suit,

do yer own dirty work; I'm through with ther game."

In his way he was as obstinate as Warner had been, and every whit as cool.

"Hist! Not another whisper, or you die on the spot! We will attend to your case later on. Hold your knife at his back, and if he whispers send him over the range. Here comes our game now."

"Jest a nice leetle pic-nic, this are," muttered the man of the rope, though not loud enough for his words to be audible to the crouching Bandy, whose knife seemed almost entering his back.

"Pullin' outen ther game don't seem ter hev helped ther case ov yourn trooly. I'm a-seein' ontirely too much ter suit ther tastes ov 'ther boss.' Ter say nothin' ov ther chainces ov bein' hung fur murder ef Silverado finds out this hyer night's work, it's purty sure he'll send me over ther range 'cause ov bein' too onreliable ter live. Oh, Rufus, you be 'lected this time, sure."

There was no particular sadness in his tones; and though he no doubt realized the seriousness of the situation, one who could have both known his thoughts and watched his countenance, would have sworn he was speaking ironically.

Yet, his case was every whit as desperate as he suggested, and the wonder was he was still alive. After the summary way in which Dave Warner had been disposed of, the life of a tramp, "fat, ragged and sassy," would hardly count much when the danger signal was out.

For that the fellow was a tramp and bummer of the very toughest description, no one in Silverado had for a moment doubted, from the time, a few days previous to the opening of this chronicle, he strolled into the camp.

Just how he had lived no one could have told, for the place of his sleeping quarters was a mystery, and no one had seen him eat a bit of anything more solid than a piece of broken cracker; but he had a wonderful capacity for fluids.

He indulged that at the expense of the camp, which willingly set them up for the first two days as a reward for exhibitions of his skill with the long rope he had brought with him, swung across one shoulder in a coil.

Truly, nothing like it had ever been seen in Silverado; and there were plenty of men there who thought they knew how to fling a lasso.

Then came a day when the citizens were thinking of something else, or had lost their curiosity. Ragged Rufe, as he had named himself to the first inquirer, lost his audiences, and for the first time went dry.

After that came—the men in the masks, who met him in a retired nook, and hustled him off after the fashion already described.

One cast of the rope he had made; and, it seemed, at the wrong party. He began to be more than ever interested in the mystery of the night's doings, and had he been offered his choice, would doubtless have elected to remain on the spot and run his chances, in preference to stealing away, and knowing no more.

"Yaas," he continued, bending a trifle lower to catch a better glimpse of what might be going on beyond. "Like ez not it'll be death ter me; but w'ot, oh, w'ot'll it be to ther other party? Ef I could see ez it would do me ther least, teenty, weenty good I'd tip him a warnin'; but fur w'y should I be a corpus, an' be givin' leg-bail, 'thout a thought ov his Onkle Bedrock, w'ich ther same are Ragged Rufe, ther head ov ther Primroses, an' ther chief blossom among all trumps? Le'ss watch, an' lay now."

The sound of a light step reached his ears quite distinctly, and he knew the real work of the evening was about to begin.

A muttered curse following close on the sound of the footstep came to his ears also; and then, what he understood was an order, though in so low a tone he could not catch its sense.

The result was, the ruffian who had stepped out with the leader stepped back once more, while "the boss" went forward in the direction of the coming footman.

The two met.

That much Ragged Rufe was assured of; but for some time not a word of a conversation which followed could be catch.

Only, from the low murmur of their tones

he could guess the talk was earnest on either side. What it might all be about was a deepening mystery.

Then, suddenly one of the voices rose, and the words came sharply to him.

"Who are you, sir; and by what right do you approach me? You are not the Richard Avenel I was to meet here, and at this hour. Stand back and let me pass."

"Scarcely, my friend, till I know who and what you are. You have heard too much if you are not Harvey Heath. If you are, there is more to be said."

"But not another word from me, here and now. Ah!"

No Harvey Heath could this be, for that name must belong to a man; and there was no mistaking the sex of the one who uttered that exclamation.

The boss had snapped finger and thumb by way of signal, and then taken a brisk step or two forward, while out from cover came the ruffian who was free to move at his beck. The two were closing in on the stranger, and they were coming with weapons in their hands.

If they counted on an easy victory, they reckoned without their host.

Woman though this might be, she was none of the die-away kind.

With a deftness that would have done credit to the chief of the camp, she whipped out a revolver and threw up the muzzle, while the click of the rising hammer sounded shrilly on the evening air.

"Back there, whoever you are! If you mean mischief, I am ready for it, and another step in my direction and you drop. Raise a weapon, either of you, and I pull trigger."

The dimness of the evening favored her somewhat, since it was not certain which one of the two was covered, and from the practiced ease with which the pistol was produced, each one might well have been pardoned for thinking it was himself. For a moment there was a deadlock.

"Steady, you!" exclaimed the man in the mask.

"We are two to one, and though you may drop the one, the other will never miss. Hands up, or it will be the worse for you!"

"Your bluff won't win," retorted the other, in a calm tone. "One warning, and if you don't take it, I'll kill you both. Up with your hands and march to the rear. Go!"

Two pairs of hands went up, and two men wheeled about; but almost at the same instant a third man rose from the ground at the back of the apparent victor, threw out his arms, and twisted him, or her, over his knee.

It was Bandy, who had left Ragged Rufe to his own devices, at the signal from the boss, and came upon the carpet just in time to save him from an ignominious defeat.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN WHO INTENDED TO BE RICHARD AVENEL.

"STEADY, there! No noise. Shut off her windpipe until she has sense enough not to scream. The other game ought to be showing up, and we have got to provide for it. If it got warning, the work of the night could only be half done."

The words of the boss were uttered in a whisper. He had turned at slight sounds of the struggle, and now advanced with rapid steps and outstretched hands.

"Nary noise," growled Bandy, in a deep whisper, that might have been taken for a smothered roar.

"Ef she kin fetch a yowl with my fingers on her thrapple, I'll want ter quit, an' I hain't bin known, so fur, ez ther quittin' kind. Say w'ot, an' it'll be done."

"Just a glimpse of her face, to make sure I'm not on the wrong level; then, hustle her off into the bushes, and keep her mum, but don't harm her. Ben and I will have to run the rest of the entertainment. What did you do with the tramp?"

"Twisted the rope 'round his neck. Reckon you kin hear him cho kin' now."

It did sound like that, and a low curse dropped from the lips of the boss.

"One of you silence him, and then rejoin me here, whilst the other takes care of the girl. I have her face down fine, and would-

n't care if she was out of the game for the present; she will not be hard to find again."

"Ther contract are a-growin'," grumbled Bandy, as he started off with the limp form under one arm, while the fingers of the other hand still rested around her throat.

"One down an' 'nother come on. Hyer's three gotten away with a'ready, an' no knowin' how many more's ter come. Ef wages ain't a-risin' I wonder w'y not."

Though they were not coming with the best of intentions, Ragged Rufe had reason to bless their return. Another moment, and he would probably have been past help.

Bandy had applied his noose after a scientific style, and the more Uncle Bedrock struggled, the tighter it drew. He was just at the last gasp.

The man spoken of as Ben stepped coolly to his side, a knife in his hand.

"'Pears like a dre'ful waste ov talent. a-mussin' with a galoot like that, but it hez ter be did. Good-by!"

The knife in his hand started on its downward stroke, and there did not seem to be the least chance in the world for the apparently doomed man.

Even the hardened Bandy shut his eyes, and slightly shuddered as he heard a heavy thud, as though the knife had gone hilt home.

Then—something struck him.

Bandy dropped like a log, from a flush hit on the corner of the jaw, and lay just as silent as his companion was doing, knocked completely out with one stroke.

The assailant did not wait to see how well his work had been done. He knew to an ounce the weight of his blows, and needed no assurance when he once felt them go home.

With the step of a panther he turned away, and stole toward the man in the open.

Once beyond the screen of bushes and he could see that "the boss" was striding away from the spot, moving down the trail at rather a rapid pace.

"Just as well," thought the man of blows.

"He didn't hear the little side show, and I can choose my own time for the regular circus to commence. He's the man I'm after; and, I swear I'd like to know something more about him before I send him over the range. And over the range he has got to go. The man who plays such dirt on Dave Warner has got to stand the reckoning, and nothing short of that can fit the case."

Dave Warner it was, in life, and very fair strength. The depths of the dump-hole had not held him, and he had come back to see that the work was finished after his own pattern.

He stole along rapidly and silently, though never seeking to take advantage of any possible cover. The man in advance could not possibly turn around without his seeing the movement, and that was all the warning he wanted.

There was a move, however, of which he had not thought; and suddenly "the boss" made it.

Down to the ground he dropped; and at that distance, and in such a light, he looked little more than a splotch on the trail. Evidently he had a suspicion, to say the least, that all was not right.

A pistol-shot would have been the next thing in order, and it would have come had not Warner followed the lead, and done precisely the same thing. He could be as reckless as any one when the occasion demanded; but after all, he did not care to throw his life away, and it was safe to guess the boss was no novice in the use of weapons, and that he would not hesitate to use them.

The movement saved Dave's life. The muzzle of a revolver was trained his way, and he dropped only just in time to disconcert the aim of the other, whose finger was all ready to press upon the trigger.

With both men down neither could obtain anything like a certain view of the other.

Warner did not hesitate. The distance between the two was not great, and if the other remained stationary it would not take long to come to close quarters. He began to crawl cautiously forward, keeping his eye fixed on what seemed to be a motionless shadow.

Such it seemed to be; but the light was deceptive, and the man a past master in the art of attack, defense, and retreat. A min-

ute or two passed, and the shadow was no nearer.

Then, just when Dave was deciding to spring to his feet and risk a forward rush, it vanished.

There was a little inequality in the ground, and beyond it cover of which a cautious man might take good advantage.

Warner realized that he had lost a point in the game.

If the man was in full retreat there was little likelihood of overtaking him. If he was on the defensive the chances were in his favor.

"Good-evening, Mister Man. We'll let this thing rest right here for the present," thought the sport, as he turned to retrace his steps.

"I don't feel quite as mad as I did, and you'll keep for another time. I had better take a look at your heelers. They will be coming around shortly, and it seems to me they were up to some deviltry when I told them to sit down. Perhaps I have only been giving them a chance to go on and finish their work."

He hastened his steps somewhat, but when he arrived at the spot where he expected to find them the two ruffians were nowhere to be seen.

Instead, there was a battered, ragged, gasping old tramp, with a trimly-built, well-clad young fellow bending over him, putting to his lips a flask of something stronger than water.

The youngster turned with a start, as Dead Game Dave came striding up. If a weapon had been handy it might have been a dangerous intrusion.

"Take it easy, my friends. I'm only looking for a trifle of lumber I thought I had laid away somewhere around here. If it's gone, perhaps it is so much the better. If I can do you any service say the word. If I can't I'll move on toward town. I don't gush over the lay-out as I find it here."

"Ah, you are the man who came to our assistance when we needed you most. Thanks. Another moment and this person would have been dead. And after that, I can hardly guess what they might have had in reserve me."

"No thanks needed, since I had it in for the two ruffians. I have a small account against them, and came back in hopes there would be a chance to continue the settlement. What became of them?"

"They came to their senses about the time I was beginning to recover my strength. When I saw them staggering away I had no desire to hinder them, and I only hope I shall never see them again. Is your name Avenel?"

"If you were expecting a gentleman by that name I am sorry to have to say it is not," was the answer, in rather a gallant tone.

Warner had already fathomed the open secret that the seeming youth was a woman in a masculine garb.

"My name is Warner—Dave Warner according to the nomenclature of the camps—and I am a weary pilgrim to the town of Silverado. As the fun seems to be over I think I will continue the march; and if you will allow an utter stranger to air his opinion I will say honestly I think it would be best all around if you would turn your steps in the same direction. This will not be the safest place for you if the rascals get over their panic and come back. They are capable of anything, as I have had good reason to know."

"Thanks. I will accept the invitation. It is too late to linger here longer; and though I can't say that I am charmed with his looks I should suggest to this party he had better go along with us."

"Thankee, with a big T," answered the revived Bedrock.

"I'm your 'umble, bumble, over-come-tumble sarvent, an' though known ez Bedrock, an' ez Ragged Rufe in other quarters, hyer I expected ter pose ez Richard Avenel, gent at large, an' master ov a secret. Ther time are onpropishus fur that, howsome-dever, an' fur ther peresent I'll just toot me own horn, all alone, ef I don't sell a clam, an' say, good-evenin' all."

And without further delay or explanation Bedrock turned to one side and strode away

into the bushes, leaving the others to look after him, the one, full of amusement, the other, of surprise and doubt.

CHAPTER IV.

IN DANGER.

"It hardly seems possible," muttered the woman in the semi-disguise.

"I do not understand what to make of it. He heard me, perhaps, mention the name Avenel; but I certainly did not give the other. Richard Avenel. That was the man I was to meet here; but this fellow looked like a totally different person. I must have more than his say-so before I trust him. He may be in with the gang which tried to capture me—though he seemed about to fare badly enough at their hands."

The words were not addressed to Dave Warner, and that worthy made no answer, but strode away, allowing the other to follow at will.

It appeared to require something of an effort to quit puzzling her brains over it; but the effort was made, and with a few hasty steps the woman placed herself again by his side.

"You are a stranger in Silverado, I presume," was her salutation, made in quite a different tone from the one she had been using.

"For the present, yes. It does not take me long to get acquainted though, and in a few days, it will most likely seem as though I had always lived here."

"You are going to the town, then, with the idea of making it your permanent residence?"

"I can't say that, exactly, because I don't often stay long in one place, and I am by no means sure I shall like the town when I get there. But I will probably remain till I either make or break. Then, I will, as usual, go on to the next place."

"And you might find you had gone to a worse one. If a person can once 'catch on' in Silverado there is plenty of opening, whether he be rich or poor, and though there is the usual assortment of bad men, there are plenty of others who will do to tie to."

"Yourself among the number?" laughingly questioned the sport.

"When I am sporting the unmentionables, yes," responded the other, without seeming to take offense.

"And at other times you will always find a friend in Dell Daly, who runs the Silver Seam Saloon. I take it you are a man without nonsense, and that frank statement will not be misunderstood. You stood by me to-night, without a question; I hope to be able always to do the same by you, as one sport with another. But in the way of business, if our interests should happen to clash we must play the games as they suit our hands. That's business as it should be."

"Certainly. I don't ask a friend to spring the cards to bring out a winning Jack when I have my little fortune lumped on that card. A fair show and no favor is all I ever asked from any one, whether friend or foe; and if I am any judge of such matters I will always meet that with you. I do not deserve any thanks for happening around when you had need of me, for I was there on my own affairs. The rascals tried to drop me to the bottom of a dump hole near by. They thought they had done it, but I hung on to the edges by my eyelids, and came back on them for vengeance. I slipped up on it, but there is another time coming, and sooner or later I'll be apt to get more than even. I have the trio down very fine, and it will be hard for them to throw me off if I meet any of them again. As for the man who called himself Richard Avenel—I am not so sure, but somehow I imagine I have a crow to pick with him too. Do you know anything about him?"

"Not under that name; but he has been hanging about Silverado for some days, apparently the most dilapidated and worthless vagabond who ever struck the camp. Can it be all that was but part of a disguise?"

"Don't trust him too far until you find out. There is something about him that ought to be familiar, but I swear, I don't know where to place him."

"I will probably hear more from him before long, and perhaps I can then give you something to refresh your memory. I have an interest in the fellow, as you can imagine from what you must have heard. Coming in such a shape I can't say I am inclined to trust him further than I can keep him covered."

"And yet he may be all right. Let it go at that for the present. I'll know whether I have a score to settle with him soon enough. If it should turn out that I have I will keep my hands off till you get through with him. Are there more of the same sort in Silverado?"

"Plenty; as well as of men of every other description under the sun."

"He looks as though he might be at the one end of the scale. As I may find the information of future service could you not tell me what there is at the other? Who is the shining light, and what is his particular vanity?"

"You must mean Colonel Randall. He is the mighty chief, whether it be for his wealth, his skill with the cards, the pistol, or the use of his wits to win fortune and popularity. If you will take the advice of one who desires to be a friend you will steer clear of him, at least until you get the run of the ropes thoroughly well. He is apt to take dislikes; and in Silverado the dislike of Colonel Randall is a dangerous thing."

"Thanks, but I fancy I can generally hold my own. He seems to be an all-round sport. Perhaps we could arrange it to pull together."

"Scarcely, unless he was certain he had bought you body and soul, and the price paid was none too large."

"Friend of yours?"

There was no immediate answer to the question, but after a moment's silence Dell Daly thoughtfully said:

"I wish I knew."

"Glad there is something you want. If you wish for it very bad I might find out—if you will promise not to shoot me for the telling of it."

"For a new acquaintance you are getting along very well; but by the time you have been in Silverado a week, if you are living, you will not make such a mistake. He could hate me to his heart's content and it would never turn a hair—provided I only knew it."

"In a thing of that kind if a woman's wit fails I suppose there is not much chance for me, but if I have the opening I will try all the same. From what you say I should judge he is a good man to beware of; and so, my curiosity has increased ten thousand fold. I suspect the colonel and I will either be thick as thieves, or at daggers' points, before the week is out. Which shall it be? I'll take my cue from you."

"Daggers' points, for choice!" burst out Dell Daly.

"I may wrong him, but there has been something telling me he could be no friend of mine, nor of any one I could call friend. Never mind what you may see, or think you may see; what I have been telling you is the truth, as I see it. Silverado might call me bad names if they heard what I have been saying, and I assure you I am not in the habit of airing my opinions for the benefit of the public at large."

"Consider the confidence sacred. I understand how things have to be with a lady in your line of business, and respect her wishes. But here we are, at Silverado at last. If you want to flit quietly and alone there is nothing to hinder. I will hardly look further than to find a place where I can eat and sleep; but to-morrow I hope to be in better heart, and sooner or later drift into the Silver Seam. Don't think I will presume upon the present pleasant acquaintance. I will come in the regular fashion, and let my works speak for themselves. All the same, if you need me, let me know. From what I have seen to-night I can guess you have enemies of a kind who are not altogether to be despised."

"So I have discovered, though I think for the future I can take better care of myself, now that I know the fact. You did not witness the first part of the interview or you would be less apt to think I am boasting. Good-night. I need hardly explain that as Harvey Heath I have an incognito to keep up, and as I have your permission I will retire."

She extended a slender, shapely hand, which Dave Warner grasped with a firmness that one sport gives to another—and nothing more. Then Dell Daly glided away, and Warner stood watching her retreating figure until its outlines were swallowed up in the darkness.

"As usual. Trouble in the near future, and Dave Warner in the thick of it. I might have found a more unprofitable friend, but I didn't. I suppose I will hold on, now, till the last horn blows, and then find it to be the old story. The grand shake, and no thanks. Now, for a lay-out of some kind, and a fair night's rest. I want a clear head when I sit down with the colonel on the other side of the table."

The lights along the one principal street of Silverado were still shining brightly, and he had no trouble in finding his way along the narrow path by the side of the road.

The town was strange to him so far as any acquaintance with it went, but one mining-camp is very much like another, and he went straight on, with entire confidence that he would arrive at the very sort of place he was aiming for.

He had asked no questions of Dell Daly in regard to the reasons for the little affair he had interrupted. To tell the truth, he had very little curiosity.

He had been in too many such affrays to worry much about causes, and as long as the results were right he was satisfied.

He could well imagine he had not endeared himself to the three men with whose plans he had so seriously interfered, but he hardly suspected that one of them was upon his trail, and at that very moment was crouching not a score of yards away, a revolver poised.

CHAPTER V.

A VAIN CAST.

RAGGED RUFÉ had no particular objective point in view when he turned away, after making the surprising statement that he was the Richard Avenel expected at that spot.

Whether he was or was not, he saw there was no chance now for an interview of a private sort with the owner of the Silver Seam, but he did not care to precede her to the town.

Neither did he care to go far in the opposite direction.

Careless as he might be, there were times when he shunned what some men call danger, and which he classed under the all-embracing name of "fun."

For that night, at least, he had had enough of "the boss" and his henchmen, and so turned off from the trail, intending to find a spot which might seem a secure resting-place. Bedrock could sleep as well under a tree, with a stone for a pillow, as he could in a palace.

Rather better, in fact. At odd times he tried respectability, and the precise formalities of genteel life; and found them too irksome to be long borne.

He had gone a couple hundred yards when it seemed to him he caught a faint smell of smoke, and he began to look cautiously around. It might be he was approaching the camp of the mountain outlaws with whom he had just had such a serious interview.

It would have been better if he had begun his prudence a little sooner, and been somewhat more careful now that he was at it. He parted the bushes in front of him carefully enough, but unfortunately he stepped forward at the same time. His arms were to him like the whiskers of a cat, and he was sure that wherever they were outstretched he could go as noiselessly.

The upshot of it was, he stepped out into nothingness, and went floundering down a steep bank, only saving himself from a severe fall by an exhibition of agility hardly to be looked for from one of his somewhat massive frame.

In spite of the sudden tumble Bedrock had his wits about him when he landed, and straightened up, swinging his only weapon, the rope, around his head, ready for a throw if any enemy should be in sight.

"Stiddy be jerks, pard!" mumbled a voice from the rear, and he wheeled as though on springs.

What he saw was not very terrifying.

Under the shade of an overhanging rock, reclining by the side of a small and smoldering fire, was a man almost the duplicate of himself. He was just as battered and ragged, and on just as good terms with the world and himself.

"Sling yer las' rope an' squattyvoo. 'Commydashuns are not much ter brag on, but they're free ez air, an' ther more yer tries 'em ther better, ye'll like 'em. I'm Honest Pete; who be you?"

"I b'lieve ye, me boy. It's on'y honesty an' strick 'tenshun ter bizness which kin 'cumulate sich a magnificent lay-out. I kin sw'ar ye'r honest, an' I'll take ther Pete part on trust tell we be better 'quainted. W'ot yer doin' hyer, an' whar did yer come frum last?"

"Reclinin' at my ease, an' last frum ther land ov dreams. Permanent residence Silverado, howsumcomdeavor, though I bin out a perspectin' fur ther last ten days, an' most like, when I kin get somebody ter whack up ther grub-stake, I'll go ag'in. Ez I war clean down ter bedrock—"

"W'ich?" asked Rufus, sharply, as though he thought there might be an effort to take his name in vain.

"Ez I war clean dead-broke, an' not sure ov a friend at first sight, I left ther camp ter keep tell mornin' when I got 'thin shout-in' distance, an' bunked in fur ther night. I've hed me beauty sleep, though, an' ez a stranger, jest dropped in, I'm willin' ter do ther best I kin ter entertain yer, though 'backy are skimp, an' old rye skeerser than hen's teeth."

"Thanks, but I'm reasonably well provided with both, an' I couldn't think ov keepin' yer awake at this hour ov ther night. Reckon I'll be goin' on ter Silverado ef I kin wunst git my bearin's ag'in."

"Great Bolliver! Ef you hev ary juice ov ther corn sot it out an' I'll take yer in on ther ground floor ther very fu'st time I make another strike. W'y, I'm so dry I kin actooally begin ter hear meself crack; an' ef I hev ter go beggin' much longer I wouldn't wonder ter split wide open. Fur sweet charity's sake, pard!"

The pleading tone he threw into his voice was not to be resisted. With something like a flourish Bedrock drew out his flask, and having thoughtfully sampled it deeply himself, passed it over to the man who called himself Honest Pete.

From the long, lingering pull the fellow took he did not seem to have greatly exaggerated his thirst. When he returned it, after a few minutes of silence, it was empty.

"Ah," he said, with a great sigh of satisfaction.

"That puts heart in a man. 'Slong ez you hed that you could 'a' sot up fur a king on short notiss. I'm a dook myself, a'ready, an' ef ther tide keeps a-risin' ther way it hez begun, I'll be a emp'ror in less ner five minnits."

"Not ef I knows it," retorted Bedrock, in a voice of scorn, as he held up the empty flask.

"You'll be nothin' but a old, ragged, dirty tramp, footin' it along ther way ter Silverado, an' me a-bringin' up ther rear ter see yer don't flew ther track. Yer think I'd camp out hyer, me empty ez a drum, an' you fuller ner a tick, an' no way ov fillin' me? Sca'ssy. I war willin' fur ye ter take a heavy snort, but I wa'n't lookin' fur ye ter clean up ther ontire outfit."

Bedrock had no weapon but his rope, while it was to be presumed the tramp prospector had some weapons that might seem more dangerous. Talk like this would have sounded like a bluff of the heaviest description if it had not been accompanied by a movement, so quickly made it was hardly perceptible until done.

With a quick, underhanded cast, Ragged Rufe shot out his noose, and then gave a tug little less than Herculean in its effects.

Honest Pete no doubt thought he had undertaken to chaff the wrong person.

Down he came, with a thundering thud, and before he knew what had happened Bedrock was astride of him, twisting his arms behind his back.

With practiced fingers he ran over the body of the fellow, and speedily drew from their places of concealment a revolver and a huge knife.

"Thar, dug-gun ye, I've drawed yer teeth, an' we kin move along like frien's an' brothers. Unkel Bedrock are ong root fur Silverado, an' Honest Pete, he goes along."

Swiftly he coiled up his rope as he spoke, having already thrust away his knife and pistol somewhere among his rags.

Honest Pete uttered something between a growl and a snarl, but lay where he fell.

"Twon't do, Peter. You cain't ketch this chicken nappin', an' ther only thing fur you ter do are ter turtle. You got ter fill her up ag'in ef yer hez ter steal ther where withal. Rise, Honesty, er feel ther eend ov ther rope."

The fellow got up with an alacrity that was gratifying to Bedrock, judging from the laugh he gave.

"That's ther ticket, pard. Now step out, an' we'll hev a real good time goin' in ter ther city tergether. No 'fense meant, an' remember it's my benzine ez are a-makin' yer feel so good."

Pete made the best of a bad job. He stepped out according to order, and before long the two were treading the road toward Silverado with every appearance of complete cordiality toward each other.

"Reckon this are a squar' deal," said Pete, at length.

"I allow I played yer dirt, an' yer hed a perfeck right ter git even. But yer ain't goin' ter keep me tools, be yer?"

"Only jest tell we gits ter town, an' I kin fix meself in shape fur ther givin' ov 'em back. I got ther tables turned, an' they'll stay got 'slong ez it's safe an' conveniyent."

"That's all right ag'in, pard. Fu'st off I war thinkin' you might be one ov Randall's heelers, sent ter lay me out. He'd give a cold hundred ter git me in sich a box ez you got me, but it don't lay in his or'nary boots ter do it, double durn ther false hearted rascal. He's bin ther ruin ov Honest Pete, an' now he's a-doin' his best ter keep him down."

"Yer mean, Kunnel Randall?" asked Rufe, with an immediate air of interest.

"Cain't say ez I like him meself. W'ot's he bin a-doin'?"

"I'll tell yer that, pard when I knows yer better: an' when I do it's even money, an' big, thet it makes yer hair curl. But I ain't a-trustin' ther secrets ov a lifetime tell I know I'm a-puttin' 'em whar they'll do ther most good. But ef you an' I should make up minds ter train tergether, an' I let yer onter ther inside, you'll know a heap sight more 'bout Randall than Silverado does. You hear me?"

There was more in the manner of Pete than in his words. It really seemed that all he needed was a little urging, to make him tell something truly remarkable.

But Bedrock did not urge worth a cent. Instead of that he turned the subject by a question or two in regard to Silverado at large.

Pete seemed to have no great love for the town, and answered with freedom, and an exactness derived from a long residence in the place. The subject kept their tongues employed until they had fairly entered the town.

Then it was they heard steps in front of them, and finally made out the outlines of Dave Warner as he strode along through the lines of light streaming out through various uncurtained windows.

And Bedrock caught sight of something else. He saw dimly a man, who was crouching, revolver in hand, its muzzle turned toward the sport.

Instantly, his rope was in his hand, and with one swing the noose left on its errand.

It seemed to settle fairly over the head of the lurker, but at its touch he gave a cry of surprise and bounded away in headlong flight.

A low execration dropped from the lips of Bedrock, who coiled in his lasso without moving an inch. When he reached the noose he found the rope there had been cut smoothly through with a sharp knife.

CHAPTER VI.

"DEAD, FUR A DUCKAT, DEAD."

THE noise made by the man in retreat attracted Warner's attention, and he glanced carelessly in that direction, without any idea he had special interest in the matter.

When he had a fleeting glimpse of the figure of the man, it reminded him of Bandy, but he could not be sure. The discovery of the presence of Bedrock and Honest Pete turned his attention that way.

"It's all right, pard," said Rufe, stepping forward.

"Sighted a craft that looked like a bloody pirate, an' gave him a hint ter sheer off. One good turn d'serves another, an' mebbe I've did it. He had a ugly-lookin' gun in his hand. I'm Bedrock, ez you've heard a'ready; this hyer are Honest Pete, ov no-whar in p'rtic'lar, an' Silverado in gen'ral. Ef yer han's are clean yer needn't shake. So long. You don't look ez though you wanted ter go our way, an' I'll swear we won't go yourn."

Warner's attitude was by no means friendly, and Bedrock was wise enough to see it. He touched Pete on the elbow and slouched away, leaving the sport behind them, to follow at his leisure.

If Pete thought his companion had been merely chaffing him when he declared the flask would have to be filled again, and by him, before they parted company, he was undeceived now that they had reached the town. The king-pin held on to knife and revolver, and at a hint about returning them laid down again his platform after a manner more positive than ever.

Pete seemed to be willing to part company, even then, but Ragged Rufe would have none of it. The upshot was, the man of honesty steered the way to a saloon where, he stated, he thought he might have credit, and obtained the liquid lightning without having to ask more than once for it, though the fellow who filled the flask looked hard at his companion.

Once in the street, for they did not linger in the saloon, Pete received his weapons again, Bedrock handing them over as carelessly as though they had been a pop-gun and a toy saber.

"Reckon it's a squar' article," he said, lifting the flask to his lips.

It remained glued there for quite a time; and when he took it down, and looked around, Honest Pete had vanished.

"Looks s'pishus like," he mumbled.

"Ef it hed bin empty, now, thar would 'a' bin no call fur stayin'; but fur a man, an' him a tramp, ter run away from a flask w'ich war nigh ter full, does kinder seem ez though thar was s'uthin' rotten in Denmark. Peter, I'll hev ter hev me eyes on yer ag'in. Meantime, it's ther dooty ov yer onkle ter git himself heeled ag'in, so ez ter be ready fur ther meetin', ef ther wu'st comes to ther wu'st."

In the course of his short sojourn in Silverado, Bedrock had been using his eyes, and knew as well as any one where to go. While he had been disarmed when he fell into the hands of "the boss" and his men, they had not meddled with his purse, it being for their interest to bring him up to his work in as good a humor as possible.

He knew what he wanted, and before many minutes, and without any time lost in haggling, was heeled again, and striding down the street, ready for whatever of adventure the fates sent his way. And if something in that line did not come soon, there was no doubt but that he would go look for it.

As he stalked along, looking casually into this window and that, it seemed it had come to him. A short, stoutly built man, irreproachably clad, came hurrying up, and just in front of him stopped and spoke eagerly:

"Excuse me, sir, but have you seen anything of my Minnie?"

"Perobably not, ez I hev been outen town fur some time, but prehabs I will ef I sot out ter look fur her. Are ther ary message you would want me ter d'liver in case we should meet?"

"Thank you my friend, thank you, for the interest you have shown in the affairs of one who, I now see, is a total stranger. It is not worth while to burden your mind with what I would say, for most likely she is dead. Excuse me for interrupting you. I must hurry on or I will not be in time."

"No 'scuses necessary. Ev'rybody does it, an' your ther fu'st one ter ax pardon. Was ther a fun'ral, er do yer jest reason on g'nral principles? I've know'd some 'stonishin' cases ov mistaken 'dentity in ther matter ov corpses in my time."

"Do you really think so? You give me hope. There was a funeral, sir, of grand proportions, and at the time I had no doubt about the corpse. I saw the blackened remains taken from the ruins, I mourned over them as one who would not be comforted, and I laid her to rest in all the magnificence of style for which the Vanredseckers are noted; but a monitor within, sir, an inward monitor urged me to look further. It may be she has been abducted in connection with the Vanredsecker fortune, of which she was the sole heir while living; and I am preparing to keep my eye ready for the scoundrels when I once get on the trail of them. Ah, sir, they will have to deal with me, and this."

From his vest pocket, after some fumbling, he turned out a twenty-two caliber, whose diminutive size seemed doubly ridiculous when compared with the huge forty-four Bedrock had lately swung on.

"No doubt it'll be interestin', an' ef you send me word when it is ter come off, an' whar, I'll be sure ter be somewhar else. Fact are, I o'rt ter be thar now, an' ef you'll 'skuse me I'll pass on."

"Thanks, sir; my most heartfelt thanks. In this cold and unfeeling world it is unmistakable happiness to meet with a gentleman of such irreproachable and high-toned principles—principles, sir, worthy of a Vanredsecker of the bluest blood. Am I correct in thinking you must be connected with the family—perhaps belong to some of the collateral branches?"

"Slightly connected, I b'lieve. The DeLangdons ov Noo Yawk are descended from most everybody. What brought you hyer, ov all places?"

"Nothing brought me, sir, nothing at all. I escaped. I am now looking for my friend, Colonel Randall, who will be able to tell me something in regard to Minnie, if any one can. He was at the funeral. Good-night, sir, and if you can call on me to-morrow I shall be pleased to converse further with you on the subject. Accept my hand, sir, the hand of a Vanredsecker, which is never given unless the heart goes with it. That perhaps is the reason why Randall never really liked me."

The gentleman held out both hands as he spoke, the movement pushing up his coat-sleeves, and showing his wrists.

They were thin for a man of his build, and white, as though they might be wasted; but what attracted the attention of Ragged Rufe was an iron ring around either one, showing that though a pair of handcuffs had been severed he had not rid himself of them altogether.

It made no difference to Rufus however.

He grasped the hands in his own, gave a brace of shakes, and then allowed the gentleman to hurry away without a single question.

He stood looking after him, however, thoughtfully scratching his jaw.

"Minnie Vanredsecker! Kin it be possible? Could it be possible? An' Kunnel Randall somewhar in ther background. I've had, severial hints 'bout him ter-night, one from a tramp, an' t'other from a loonytick, consequently thar must be s'uthin' in 'em. I'm beginnin' ter be curious ter see him. Vanredsecker? Um! I've heard ther name afore, an' ef I hed bin sure he wouldn't answer 'em I mou't hev axed a few questions. I ain't sartain I oughtn't ter see whar he goes now. Reckon he told ther truth when he said he had escaped; but whar war it from, an' w'ot's ter hinder ther takin' him ag'in? I'll saunter a bit that way, ary-how."

With nothing else on his hands Bedrock was apt to follow the first promising lead he struck, and it seemed like throwing away a chance not to keep something of a watch over him since he had the time.

If Vanredsecker had kept up the gait with which he started out he would have been far enough away by this time; but he must have halted for a little, or loitered badly. It was not long before Bedrock caught sight of him again, wandering aimlessly along.

As the tramp came nearer he saw two men dash out from the shadow of a house.

They were big and brawny, looking savage enough to be dangerous, and Bedrock, too far away to interfere at once, expected to see him go down before their rush.

But Vanredsecker had sharp ears, and was by no means as careless as he looked. Just as they were almost within striking distance he wheeled, and threw himself into an attitude of defense.

The men were armed with short clubs, and without a sound hurled themselves on their victim.

One of them raised his club, and delivered a crashing blow which almost made Bedrock shudder to see.

To his surprise Vanredsecker did not go down. He parried the stroke neatly, seeming to catch it on his wrist, and then whirled his other arm around, striking with it as though it was a sledgehammer.

The other fellow was more fortunate. His blow, delivered from behind, brought Vanredsecker to his knees; and he was about to repeat it when Bedrock caught him by the throat with a grip of iron.

There was the sound of running footsteps, coming nearer, but Ragged Rufe scarcely heard them. He was holding his struggling captive fast, while he looked down at the other ruffian, whose whitening face he could see at his feet.

"Dead, fur a duckat, dead!" he exclaimed, and then half a dozen hands grasped him, and he realized that he was in the power of an excited mob, while Vanredsecker had seized his opportunity, and quietly slipped away.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RISING OF THE MOB.

THE community of Silverado was accustomed to the sight of blood, but it was usually drawn in a legitimate way. When two gentlemen settled their differences with revolvers, and one, or both, of them went over the range, it seemed but the natural thing.

But a hand-to-hand squabble which ended with one of the participants having his brains dashed out, was an entirely different thing.

That looked like murder; and for the guilty party there was but one proper ending—the rope.

The fact of the case was, there were a number of men who knew that two deputies were in Silverado, searching for what they declared was a dangerous lunatic, and they had been seen to pass on the trail of a stranger who it was thought must be the man.

It took but little noise, then, to start several men for the spot, since they were standing in front of a saloon when the two went by.

What they saw as they hurried to the spot was a squabble of some kind, and Bedrock, who was nearest to them, darted forward. Who struck the fatal blow, then, was a mystery, nor did they even have a fair view of Vanredsecker. He had vanished before they had a chance to identify him.

But they had a prisoner.

A man was dead, and as he had not come to his fate at the hands of his friend, who was quivering in the clutch of Ragged Rufe, it seemed to stand to reason the latter was in some way responsible, and Silverado was ripe for a sensation.

"What's been going on here?" asked the self-constituted leader of the crowd.

"Looks like murder, and this chap must have a hand in it."

"Don't let him get away," gasped the fellow who had just been released from Bedrock's fingers.

"He struck the blow, I'll swear to that. It was just as cold-blooded a murder as ever was. And if you hadn't come up he would have killed me, too. Look out for him! He is strong as a horse, and wicked as a tiger."

"Don't you be alarmed. We've got him, and we'll keep him till we know what to do with him; and I wouldn't wonder if the best thing would be make him stretch hemp. He may be crazy, but to me he just looks like a blamed hard case."

"Take care of him a few minutes, then, while I look after my poor pardner—Burt Jackson—as white a man as ever drew breath. It's all I ask of you, gentlemen. And help me, one or two of you, to carry him back to McGuire's. He has got to lay somewhere till the time for planting, and I guess there is where he belongs."

"We'll do that for you, stranger, but if you had just called on us in the first place this thing wouldn't have happened. Come along, you! And don't try to monkey with this crowd. It's smelled blood, and if you make them wild they will want to have more of it."

So it happened the procession streamed away down the street: the corpse, carried by the stranger and three men of the camp, at the head of it, and Bedrock, clutched by a couple of stalwart men, somewhere near the center.

The king-pin of tramps had been in such positions so often it would have been fair to say he gloried in them. He was something like the men who delight to see how near they can ride or drive to a dangerous precipice.

This time, however, he did not think the case was at all desperate.

At the worst, he was only an accessory; and he knew there was not an honest man in the camp who would not have interfered the same as he did had he seen the attack as it began.

Meanwhile, however, he was silent. No direct personal violence was offered after the seizure, and he was content to stream away with the crowd, and—to tell the truth, by so doing give the gentleman of uncertain mind a chance to make a fair offering.

He was pretty sure the deputy was mistaken, and thought it was Mr. Vanredsecker who had been captured.

McGuire's was soon reached.

The proprietor was an Irishman of that name, who kept a saloon and lodging-house combined.

It was not strictly a first-class concern, but he gave good accommodations for the money, and travelers who had stopped there once stopped there again if they came back to the town. It amounted to a saving of several dollars a day.

By the time it was reached, however, the crowd had augmented vastly, and was moving with an ominous silence. Every man who fell into the ranks after a glance at that ghastly object at the front, formed his opinion simply from what he saw; and there was more danger brewing for Bedrock than he had at first dreamed of.

Of course, more than one recognized him as the tramp who had been exhibiting his skill with the lasso, but that did not make it any the better for him as long as it was understood he had been caught red-handed, doing a murder.

On the porch of McGuire's a man was standing, watching the approach of the crowd with a careless sort of curiosity.

He was tall, straight as an arrow, with an unmistakably military bearing. To add to the latter he had a short cloak thrown over his shoulders, and wore a high-crowned, soft black hat.

As the body was borne up on the porch he was lighting a cigar, and over the still flaring match he glanced inquiringly at the fellow who had taken it upon himself to direct operations.

When Colonel Randall fixed his eye on a man it spoke volumes. There was no need in this case for his lips to frame a question.

"It's a murder, fair and square, and we saw it done. Reckon Silverado ought to do its duty."

"If she knows it, yes," was the answer, lightly spoken; "but if you think of setting me up for Judge Lynch I must beg leave to decline. Get some one who hasn't conscientious scruples about capital punishment—or else turn him loose and be done with it."

There was a sneer in the tone of the colonel which would have angered a crowd which did not know him so well as this did, yet his words stirred them up to a higher heat than ever.

"That's so," muttered more than one.

"If we don't put him through, you can bet there's no law that will. Murder it was, and he ought to swing for it, if it's only for an example. Trot out Judge Lynch, quick; and if we can't find him, let's do without him."

"You fellows can bark, but look out the other fellow don't do the biting. He looks able, and if there is anybody wants to lay

two to one, I wouldn't mind backing my opinion that he will get away with the whole of you. I think I'll retire before I get in the mix. So-long, Maddox. Let me know in the morning how you made out."

Then the colonel stepped down from the porch, and swung his way through them all, without paying the least attention to the angry snarls beginning to arise on every side.

He had stung these men more than they knew, even, and as they did not care to call him to account, they were ready to take it out of the prisoner.

"He's got his rope with him, what's the matter with using it?" sung out some one who stood three or four files back, and who therefore felt at liberty to make the suggestion.

"Fit the noose over his neck and turn him off from the sign, there. We can make him confess, anyhow!"

The crowd was ripe for the suggestion.

It was true, the body had gone on beyond their sight, and the deputy had not yet reappeared, but that made no difference. It was a veritable madness that laid hold of them for an instant, and with a savage snarl two-score men made a rush forward, the nearest snatching at the coiled rope which hung over Bedrock's shoulder as they came.

The walking philosopher suddenly changed his tactics.

He felt the gripe on his shoulders loosened by the surge of the mob, and he swung his arms around, with a mighty effort clearing a way in front of him. With a bound he was on the porch, and turning, with his back against the wall, he faced them all.

One hand grasped a revolver, while the other held his rope, and on his face there was a savage frown.

"It's an infernal lie on the one side!" he shouted; "and a set-up job on the other. I never touched the man, and if you want to hang me for trying to stop the racket, I'll die making my teeth meet. Where's your candidates for certain death? I can meet seven of them right now."

He had dropped the vernacular of the roads and camps, but no one noticed that. The open defiance, as startling as it was unexpected, made some of the nearest ones give back, but there were others, too far away to be reached by his personal magnetism, who were not staggered by the bluff. A dozen revolvers came out, a solid mob started on a rush, and Bedrock had already raised his pistol.

Just then a woman darted from the doorway, sprung in front of Ragged Rufe, and faced the crowd.

CHAPTER VIII.

DELL DALY CALLS THE TURN, AND JUDGE LYNCH WEAKENS.

"BACK, all of you! This man tells the truth though you will not listen to him. I saw the deed!"

A young woman, and a handsome woman, making such an appeal to a mob would be apt to receive a hearing, however wild it might be; but, when that young lady was one so well known and popular as Dell Daly, something like a revulsion of feeling at once set up.

There was a moment of silence, and the forward movement ceased.

Dell was known to have a way of forcing her opinions with the pistol's mouth, but that counted for little in this case.

Only, Pete Maddox, having brought himself to the front did not care to have himself shown too clearly in the wrong.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Daly, but we saw something of it, too; and if this is not the fellow who knocked a man's brains out where is he? I'll swear there is a corpse, and this man, and the party's pard, were the only ones on the ground when we got there."

"Because the real slayer slipped off. Who he was I know not, for he was an utter stranger to me; but, in any event, he only defended himself from a deadly attack. It was his life or that of the other man. He only struck the one blow, apparently with his open hand, and then ran. If you had him

I wouldn't chip quite so strong, perhaps; but you know my motto, all: 'A square deal, and no limit.' This man is better than he looks—the most of you have been down on your luck some time or other—and if you think he ought to stand a trial give it to him. I'll be a witness, and have something to say. If you are not ready for it now, I'll go security that he is on hand when you are. Fairer than that I can't offer, and if there is any gentleman here who thinks it is not the proper thing I'll be happy to argue the case with him, any way he wants to. I've taken a hand in this, and you understand, I never let up."

She spoke from the shoulder, as it were, and being a woman she could afford to. Something like a cheer greeted her effort, and then she got her answer.

"That talk's straight as a string, and what you say is as good as though it was sworn to. Run the thing to suit yourself, and the boys at the Happy-Go-Lucky will stand by you. And I don't think there's any one else here who thinks of bucking against this layout of yours however we may press the game sometimes around the Silver Seam. Take your man away and if we don't find out by morning that you were mistaken he can have a free run."

"Thank you, Charlie Fairbanks. That's white, and I know it is a white man that says it. The other party was all broke up at the death of his pard, but I guess if you put him on the stand now he would tell it about the same way I did. At least, I'd risk it. Pete Maddox, here, seems the worst of the unbelievers. He can see him, and if it's not as I say he can start the circus over again, and I'll loan out my sample room for Judge Lynch to hold his court."

She gave a graceful little bow as she ceased speaking, and turned away as she did so, in a low tone saying to Bedrock:

"You are not out of your danger yet, and if you are wise you will come along to the Silver Seam. If I once get you there I think I can promise you a fighting chance for your life. Here, the moment the old cry is raised again the mob will be all ready to join in. And somehow, I have an idea that it is an object for some one to raise the cry. You have trodden on some one's toes hard, though you may not know it."

"Thankee, miss, an' ez I said afore, I'm yer humble, bumble, overcometumble sarvent an' am on'y too glad ter hev ye loan me a quarter. Figgerative speakin', I'll hang on ter ther hem ov yer garmint, an' let yer tow me ter a place ov safety. I ain't got no call ter stay hyer."

Bedrock was moving along as he spoke, and though after they had left the vicinity of McGuire's he fell back a little he did not get far from her heels till they had arrived at the Silver Seam.

Then, Dell Daly turned on him:

"I'm not so sure I have done a good thing in saving your worthless life, for I suspect you will only be putting it in danger again, the first chance you get; and perhaps mine along with it. This thing I want you to distinctly understand. While you sport around the Silver Seam you have got to be on your good behavior or you will get set down on hard, and that just too quick. If you want to turn in—which would be about the safest thing for a gentleman of your status to do, Timmy, the bar-keep, will show you a place—and if you try to tap the till he'll shoot you dead. I'll point you out to him. If you behave yourself till to-morrow perhaps I can give you any further help that you may need. Of course, that was all nonsense about your being Dick Avenel."

"Ez fur ez baptismal sponcers went, I'm free ter admit they never heard ther name. But it's a scand'lus fact thet I are ther man w'ot perferred ter kerry that cognomen."

"And you had certain confidences to make to me?"

"I hed; but since then I've heard a thing er two thet I must take time ter put ter-gether afore I sez ary thing on ther subjects ov our confidences. It'll all keep tell ter-morrer, it'll all keep."

"I believe you are a fraud," Dell answered, looking him sharply in the face.

"In course I'm a fraud, but I kin tell yer some things wu'th ther hearin', and it won't cost yer a cent. Ter-morrer you'll

see. Ef it's all ther same ter you, an' ther offer holds, I'll bunk in now."

The fact was, Bedrock was pretty well tired out, and he did not care to be forced into doing anything which would compel him to leave the town. Rest and privacy were at present the things he wanted most.

Dell Daly was as good as her word. She turned him over to Timmy, who showed him a comfortable enough bunk in a little cuddy hole to the rear of the bar, and in ten minutes he was snoring the rest of the righteous making just noise enough to show that he was still there.

Some time in the night Bedrock awoke.

He listened, and from the utter silence which prevailed in the rooms beyond he knew that the hour was late, and the saloon had closed for the night.

Yet, what was it which had awakened him?

He could have sworn it was a noise of some kind, though he had not even heard the faint echo which usually comes to the ears of an awakened sleeper.

He knew that he was not given to nerves, and continued to lie quiet, feeling sure there would sooner or later be developments.

He was right, too.

After a few moments there was a faint creak at the window, and then a low noise as the sash was slid up.

"Hillo, Bedrock! Thar's bu'glars ter ther front. Lay low an' keep ready. Be they after me, er be they after spoils? Cain't see ez it makes a diffabiterens. It's my bounden duty ter go fur 'em with a hot foot."

So thought Rufus, as he lay and waited for what was to come next, breathing so lightly meantime that no one could suspect his presence.

The party outside was cautious, however. With the widow forced up the way in was clear, but for a little no movement was made; and this very caution bid fair to defeat itself, because the night air rushing in cooled off the little apartment and relieved it of the closeness which the presence of Bedrock had given it.

By and by, however, there was a movement. The head and shoulders of a man appeared at the window, and the fellow raised himself up cautiously, and came in. When his feet touched the floor he was so near the tramp he could have touched him had he leaned forward.

Good thing for him it was that he did not try the experiment. The muzzle of Bedrock's six-shooter was trained full upon him, and a twitch of the finger would have sent the intruder over the range.

Bedrock was not his game, however. Like one well acquainted with the place he went straight across to the door, and opened it with a confidence that seemed to show he was well aware it was never locked.

The door remained open behind him, and it happened the watcher was able to see exactly what was done.

Just by the side of the door there was a large desk; and this was opened with a key, and the lid raised.

Then, from under his coat the intruder drew a lighted lantern, small but enabling him to examine the contents of the desk.

Without any trouble he found what he wanted—a large package in one corner, which he at once examined carefully, and with apparent satisfaction. From the capacious pockets of the long overcoat he wore he produced a package similar in shape and appearance, and placed it in the desk, dropping into his pocket the one he had taken out.

His work was done, for he carefully closed the lid, and retraced his steps, sliding out of the window as noiselessly as he had entered, and dropping it behind him.

"Great Scott!" thought Bedrock. "Hy'er's ther chaince ov a lifetime. He's rung in a hull packidge ov sanded decks, an' are arrangin' ter scalp ther house at ther next meetin'. Wot's ther matter with Bedrock layin' low an' takin' his leetle divvy? I'm down on me uppers, almost, an't his would sot me straight. All ther same, guess we don't, an' I'll hev ter post Miss Daly in the mornin'."

In a few moments he was asleep again, and this time his slumbers remained undisturbed.

CHAPTER IX.

BEDROCK PREFERS TO HOLD THE AGE.

THE Silver Seam opened at an early hour in the morning, for though it was run as a gambling house the profits of the bar were not to be despised, and there was a large custom for early morning bitters.

As a general thing Miss Daly seldom put in an appearance much before dinner time, leaving the management of the place to her head bartender, Timmy.

This morning, however, she somewhat astonished him by stepping in shortly after the shutters were down.

"Our vagabond friend of last night—has he skipped the ranch, and taken the tables with him; or is he still snoring?"

"Snoring he is, and the way he saws wood you can expect him to keep it up till dark again. It's the first time he has got into a decent bed since the days before '40, and he counts on making the most of it. I thought he would be out here striking me for a drink before I could get the shutters down; but, not he."

"Never mind. For a fellow that last night came twice to the shadow of death, like he did, he is doing well, and deserves the chance to keep it up. Don't waken him, but when he comes out treat him well, and tell him not to go away until I have had a talk with him."

There was no need for the direction for at this very moment Bedrock appeared in the doorway.

He had combed his hair out with his fingers, and had the sand pretty well rubbed out of his eyes, but he was not exactly prepossessing in looks, nor exactly the sort a timid young lady would care to meet in a lonely place, if she carried a full purse.

"Mornin' miss. I'm yer 'umble sarvent 'slong ez you stan' ready ter loan me a quarter; an' I'd be yourn trooly, even ef yer didn't. I've hed a good night's rest, w'ich war s'uthin' I needed bad, an' now, I'm yourn ter command."

"And I suppose the first thing needed is an eye-opener."

"S'kassly—ez I've hed it a'ready, outen ther private vial I allers kerries; but ez you went bail for me last night, guess you got ther orderin' ov me tell I'm deescharged by ther court—er w'ot goes fur sich in these sorter places."

"Oh, that little matter is all arranged. Seems to have been a mistake, though it looks as though it might have been done on purpose. You are safe enough from the city until you break out again in a fresh place. And now, I would like to know what it was you wanted with me; and how you knew anything about the matters you hinted at in your letter."

She lowered her voice, and as Timmy had discreetly retired to the front door, and no one else was about, there was no present reason why he should not answer as freely here as he would have done on the mountain-side, especially as his presence, in confidential discourse, was abundantly accounted for on other grounds.

He seemed somewhat at a loss how to begin; which, for Bedrock, was a novelty.

Dell waited for the answer which did not come, and then spoke quite sharply:

"After what I saw I can hardly believe you were only a stool pigeon, to draw me out there to be trapped. And yet, I sometimes think it begins to look like it. Speak up, and stick to the truth. If you know nothing, say so, and be done with it."

"I begins ter think I knows too all-fired much, an' that's a fack. It don't all gee right tergether, an' I've got ter hev time ter 'range things on ther new basis. I thort I knowed yer game, an' I war goin' ter see ef we couldn't work it so ez ter suit my hand ez well ez yourn, but frum ther latest I judge I've bin mistaken—an' mebbe you're in ther same boat. S'pose we draw out a bit, an' run our own clam wagons tell we see better how trade are goin' ter be."

"Very well. You can arrange your story to your own liking, and when ready I'll listen to it. How much I will believe is a totally different matter."

"Thar ain't no story ter 'range; an' ef thar war yer don't s'pose I'd shoot it off on you, a'rter w'ot you done. I'll go yer this much, an' then you kin wait tell I'm ready with

ther rest. I tho't I could prove thet a sar'tin sport war ther man you tho't he war; an' ef so, we might work a game tergether in w'ich thar war ez much coin an' vengeance as either ov us would want."

"Well?"

"An' now I've hed later informashun, an' begins ter think we're both on ther wrong track, unless we be after bigger game then we kin see in sight."

"And if you had talked to me that way last night, do you know what I would have done with you up on the mountain-side, with no one around to hinder?"

Bedrock shrugged his shoulders.

Miss Daly was a woman, and therefore he might be pardoned for not caring to hazard a guess at what she might have done under certain circumstances.

"I would have shot you down where you stood as the safest way to block the game I would have been certain you had in view."

"So yer orter; so yer orter. I cain't say thet it warn't a ongentlemanly trick ter make a 'p'intment afore I war dead sure fur bizzness. But thet ain't a sayin' I won't be afore ther eend are reached. An' ter show w'ot it are ter take in a angel onawares I kin put yer up to a game w'ot I don't think war played fur ther fun ov it. Ef it don't save yer dollars an' cents, I ain't l'arned much in me travels."

Dell Daly looked at him with a good-natured smile. Perhaps she was angry, perhaps disgusted. Then, again, she might only be incredulous. That smile was only a mask she had accumulated in her profession.

Nevertheless, when Bedrock went on to tell her what he had seen in the night, she showed she understood the possibilities of the game of faro, even if she did run it on a square basis, and without a limit.

"The party knows the house like a book," she remarked thoughtfully, as she glanced over the package of cards which had replaced the one she had kept stored there.

"If I had not been warned of it, I could not have told the difference; and I hardly believe there is any even now—or won't till I see the inside."

"My han's is toller'bly clean, an' ef you cain't find it jest turn 'em over to me. Ef they ain't bin sanded, er trimmed, er s'uthin' ov ther kind, call me a Dutchman."

"Thanks, but I think I can find out for myself," she said, as she deftly separated the cards of the pack she had opened.

There were just three in her right hand, while the balance of the deck remained in her left.

"Marked, ain't they?" asked Bedrock, as she spread out the three with a quick motion of her shapely thumb, and examined the backs.

"Ef he knows ther bottom keyard, reckon he'd hev one turn down fine purty nigh every game; an' ther man ez cuts 'em are in with ther sharp ef he ain't the 'rigernal Jacobs hisself. Sabbee?"

"Perfectly. But I am afraid it won't work precisely as it was intended. I suppose this is a square confidence you are giving me, an' it will go no further, even after the game is over. It is asking a good deal of you to keep a secret, but you look as though you might be better than your class; and I think I can make it worth your while."

"Don't you worry 'bout yer onkel. He may be dirty, an' he may be ragged, but thar's one thing he's allers ready ter swar to, an' that is that he's white. With a lady in ther game, he's dumb ez a clam. Fix it ter suit yerself, an' I'll on'y ax fur one reecompense, ter hev a back seat, somewha'r in ther tail eend ov ther sanctuary, whar I kin see how it comes out. Jest speak a word fur me with yer bouncer, an' I'll peromise not ter interfere with ther workin's ov Perovidens, an' ther fingers w'ot manipylerates ther box."

"So that you don't press my game I will see you are not interfered with in the house; but if you are going to get into the front line of the spectators, soap, water, and a few new articles of clothing would make it easier for me to keep my word good. The men of Silverado are rough in manners, but in matters of dress they are sometimes inclined to be particular. When a man can look like a gentleman there is no great call

for him to ape the appearance of a beggar; and to a certain extent my purse is at your service for repairs."

"Thar's whar ther mistake are. A beggar kin be a gent, though ez fur ez reported Bedrock, ez Bedrock, don't aspire ter be either. When yer knows him better, you'll onderstand more ov him. Keep a eye out fur ther kunnel, an' I'll let yer know when ther's further d'velopments. So-long. I'll stroll out an' view ther town."

With a sweeping bow Bedrock turned away and swaggered out of the saloon, leaving Dell Daly more than ever puzzled what to make of him. He had told her next to nothing of the reasons for which he desired the interview on the mountain-side, yet she was more than ever inclined to think something would come of it.

Bedrock was not in disguise, nor was he playing a part, but she was sure he was better than he looked, and more than half believed he was her friend.

She wondered, somewhat, if he was in league with the sport who had come also to the trysting place; and what interest either of them could have in her game. As she knew nothing of them save what had come to the surface since the meeting of the night before, she soon gave the puzzle up. Time would show, and meantime she was running her own game.

CHAPTER X.

"HYER'S A LOOP, AN' THAR'S A LOOP."

It must not be supposed that the killing of a man, which had aroused a mob to the pitch of an abortive attempt at lynch law, was a matter that would be immediately forgotten in Silverado.

Pete Maddox, the leader of the mob, felt as though he had been badly bluffed, and there were a good many more of the same opinion. Had it not been that the survivor of the deputies when he came back from seeing his pard's remains composed for the night, gave a corroboration of Dell Daly's story, even her influence might have been badly stretched in saving Bedrock from violence before the night was over.

If the man with the rope was saved for the present it was pretty certain that he would have to walk circumspectly for the future or there would be trouble in store for him.

As for the gentleman who had introduced himself to Bedrock as Vanredsecker, nothing more was heard of him, though search was made at once. He seemed to have vanished and left no sign. A careful examination of the neighborhood in the morning showed no trail, and the deputy with several assistants scoured the country in vain.

When evening came the chase appeared to be for the time, given up, and Mr. Sutton—as he was registered at McGuire's—became something like a private citizen. He ate his supper with the rest of them, and then apparently started out to take in the town, forgetful of the pard who had been laid away that day without much ceremony.

There was another stranger out on the war-path for fun that evening.

Dave Warner had not been altogether uninjured by his tumble of the night before, and had spent the day in rest and recuperation.

By the time the lamps were lit, and the various saloons were in full blast, he was ready to take in the sights, and as he had made no acquaintances he went alone.

Of course he had not forgotten Dell Daly, but he left the Silver Seam to be looked up later on, and steered for the first open door which seemed to reveal the kind of game he was after.

Hank Hardy's institution for the dissemination of bad whisky was a more pretentious affair than many buildings of a better grade, so far as liquid refreshments and square treatment went.

The crowd that lived there were of the rough and tough variety, and they had little mercy for the strangers who might be attracted by the appearance of the place.

A man who ran against a skin game there got no sympathy from either the proprietor or his patrons, and if he attempted to kick went out more than shorn.

Of course, there was a semblance of order, but for all that, it was the worst place in town for a tenderfoot to venture into,

and more than one had gone out feet foremost.

There was little of this evident on the surface when Warner stepped inside of the room, and yet, somehow, he did not feel at home.

He never threw up his cards till the game was played out or he might have beaten a retreat before he had got half way across the floor. Without hesitation he made his way through the throng until he reached the bar. Something told him it would be as well to catch a sight of the proprietor before coming into close contact with the hangers on.

Hank was there; and there was no mistaking the fact that he owned the place.

He was as squarely put together a man as one could find, though in height scarcely over five feet nine. Quite a Hercules was he, in physical development, and the patrons of the place never cared to question his authority. He had a way of hitting out straight for an answer, and when he hit he always connected, and his man went down.

After that, if there was to be any argument with shooting-irons, he was as quick on the draw as any of them, and in the early days had potted his man more than once.

He was in no very good humor when Dave Warner leaned his arm on the counter of the bar, and gave a little nod.

"Your best, if you please, and if you have any friends convenient I would be pleased to have you and them join me."

The salutation of the dead-game sport did not seem to have any mollifying effect.

He glared up at the speaker, shook his head like a bull about to make a charge.

Something about the face of Dave restrained him.

His scowl changed into something like a smile, as he drew up a black bottle from under the counter.

"Thar's ther best we hev; but unless you kin scratch up a friend er so ov yer own I guess you'll drink alone. I'm temp'rance frum ther word go, an' don't swaller ther accursed stuff."

"Don't know but what you are right," answered Dave, serenely, as he poured out his potion, and then looked leisurely around.

"I feel that way myself, sometimes, but it is generally in the morning. I wouldn't count much on any sudden resolutions. I find they don't last worth a cent."

More than one man was looking his way, but no one seemed inclined to come forward. It was not the fashion to interfere with a stranger until there was a chance for profit as well as pleasure.

Dave Warner did not want particularly to drink with any of the men he saw in that glance, but if one of them had stepped forward with an evident desire to wring in he would have undoubtedly passed the bottle his way. He was more interested in deciding what Hank Hardy was after. Was the refusal to drink with him straight goods, or was it a thinly veiled insult? He thought he would find out before he left the saloon.

It was, then, something of a surprise when he heard a coarse voice at his elbow, and one that was familiar, too.

"Excuse me, David, fur not speakin' sooner. I'm yer humble, bumble, over-cometumble sarvint, ez you be well aware, an' nothin' d' suit me better than ter j'ine yer. I'm dry ez a clam at low water, an' nobody are sayin', saturate."

It was Bedrock, of course, the man with the rope. He had risen from a seat in the corner, and come to Dave's side with a noiseless tread, and a cunning look in his eyes.

"As well you as another," said Warner, coldly, "though it seems like a shame to throw away good booze on a man of your stripe. Perhaps the resources of the establishment could turn out something that would suit your tastes better, if they were strained a little."

"Wot's ther dif'rlong ez yer pays ther same price? Hyer's to yer, and may yer shadder never grow less."

The contents of the brimming tumbler went down like so much water, and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Ragged Rufe stepped aside, as though further interest in the stranger was at an end.

As Dave Warner turned off his glass at the same time, he had somewhat committed himself to the fortunes of the bumper, but he

was willing the acquaintance, for the present, should go no further. He was turning away himself, intending to seek the tables where the game of faro seemed to be flourishing after a lively manner, when a few words from Hank Hardy caused him to pause, though they were not addressed to him.

As he had already noticed, Hank was not in the most pleasant of humors, and he followed the mau with a rope with a snarl.

"That was well done, pritty, but some day you'll work the racket once too often. If the gent can't take his own part I don't know that it is fur ther interest of the house ter take it fur him. All ther same, you don't want ter try it on hyer ag'in. You beiter travel now. Thar's no use fur yer hyer, an' ef you stayed you might git yer last sickness."

"Don't be growly, Hank. I kin ov a long lived fambly, an' you needer" be fearin' ter hev a corpse on yer han's. You run faro, an' I run ther string game. I'm willin' ter buck your game, but I'm a-bettin' a good, hard, cold ten thet you can't beat mine."

And Bedrock swung the rope down from his shoulder, and then held up the coil with a shake of his hand in a challenging flourish.

"Why, blast yer ragged pict'ers, you haven't got a ten to yer name, unless it's a dime yer lifted frum ther bar when some gent furgot his change. You can throw a rope whar yer wants to, but when ther boys are in off ther range I kin pick out a dozen kin fling it better."

"Coin talks w'en it comes ter buyin' land," was the quick retort, and Bedrock drew from his vest pocket a greasy, ragged, but undeniable greenback, which sported an "X" of a conspicuous size.

"I'm fresh—wich re'ely ain't no name fur it—but hyer's ther good wealth thet sez I kin bu'st yer bank, ef yer gives me a stack ov chips an' a fair whack at yer best dealer; er thet I kin own yer shebang afore mornin' ef yer bucks hard ernuf ag'in my leetle layout. Ef ye'r a sport, now's ther time ter show yer blood an' breedin'. Put up, or shut up. I'm somethin' ov a blower me-self."

For a man who had come so near the night before, to having his neck stretched, Bedrock was attracting attention in a bad place, but he did not care for that; and Hank Hardy, who was a sport after his own fashion, came down—in his mind—to the level of the bumper.

"Ef thar's no other way ter corral that ten I reckon I kin give yer a whirl at yer own game, an' beat yer at it too. After that, you'll be blamed apt ter walk Spanish fur hev'n' too much lip. Name yer trick, and ef it looks ez though thar might be two sides to ther bettin' I'll give yer a chance, even ef I have ther short one."

"Hyer you be! Stranger, hold ther stakes; an' you men give me room accordin' ter size. It ain't much ov a game, but ef yer thinks you kin come in it'll jest cost yer ten dollars."

He moved away from the bar, opening a little lane for a few yards.

Then, he turned and swiftly flung his rope so that it lay in two or three apparent nooses.

"Hyer's a loop, an' thar's a loop. You kin stand in wich yer wants ter, an' bet accordin' ter yer pile thet it ketches, er don't ketch. It's all one wich yer choose, but it's ten I beat yer every time. Ther twist ov ther wrist beats eyesight when Onkle Bedrock han'les ther string."

"The old string game it is; but I'll give you a turn at it fur fun, with all yer wealth covered to boot. I'll pick this loop, and the stranger has my ten, too, that says—it don't catch."

Hank Hardy had dropped the note into the not very willing hand of Dave Warner, and then stepped into the nearest of the loops.

The play went on like lightning.

As Hank stepped within the coil the rope seemed endowed with life, and to rise of its own volition from the floor; while, at the same instant, a knife appeared in Hardy's hand, its keen blade darting toward the rope.

Then, drawn no one saw how or from where, a revolver in Bedrock's left hand spoke, the knife went spinning away, and Hank Hardy was shaking his fingers with a hearty oath, and the noosed rope was holding him fairly and firmly about the middle.

CHAPTER XI.

BEDROCK HOLDS HIS OWN, AND HONEST PETE COMES TO THE FRONT.

"DIDN'T I told yer so? Stranger, gi'mme ther ante."

Old Bedrock was as cool as a cucumber, though he must have known that the way he worked his little game would wake up every snake under the roof.

As he was in for whatever was to come, and not a man to fear consequences, Warner did not hesitate, but dropped the brace of ten spots into the outstretched hand, even while he was narrowly watching for what was next.

Bedrock's fingers closed on the notes, and they were thrust away hastily. Then, he was ready for Hank, and just in time.

At first, Hardy was fully occupied in shaking his fingers, and swearing at large. Had it seemed any great damage was done there would no doubt have been an immediate rush from the pack of wolves watching the game; but as no blood could be seen, and his voice was rather stronger than usual, there was a wait all around to see what his move would be. He had made several examples of his friends in the past for chipping into his game, and the crowd went slow.

Having shown that Hardy was fairly noosed Rufe allowed his rope to slacken, and Hank had no difficulty in tearing off the loop.

Once free, and he came down to a deadly coolness.

"It's a fair beat, and you kin take ther coin. I wrung in a cold deck, and you turned the jack. Now, I'll try you a whirl at a game I know I kin play, an' foul or fair, hold my own. Look out for me now, I'm comin'!"

Hank was already in his shirt sleeves, and he gave them a push up his arms one after the other, and then, with clinched fists, and arms upraised, stole toward the object of his wrath.

In spite of the fact that Rufe had just shot the knife out of his hand, he showed no fear, though his eyes were preternaturally bright, and with them he tried to fix the optics of the other.

Bedrock had a good-natured grin on his face, and seemed to be looking at nobody in particular. He did not even raise his hands as Hank came sliding within distance, though even a novice in fistic matters should have been able to see that the proprietor had a dangerous look.

But when the fist of the saloon-keeper shot out, with a force that would have broken bones, had it landed, Bedrock's jaw was not there. With a celerity and ease hardly to be looked for in the shuffling tramp, Bedrock shifted out of the way slightly, throwing his head to one side as he went and Hardy's blow went booming along through the vacant air, taking the sender along with it. Had Ragged Rufe so chosen there was no reason why he should not have sent in a knock-out blow flush on the jugular.

Instead, he laughed huskily, tapped Hank lightly with his fingers to show what might have been done, and then shifted out of range again.

"Pears like I orter shuck meself fur ther contrack, but I swear I hate ter pull me coat. Lass' time I did it in a permis'kus crowd they stole me han'kerchi', an' used me ben-jamin ter tie up ther other feller's wovnds."

"This time the other man'll hev no wovnds ter tie up. I'll give yer time ter peel, but yer may ez well save yer stren'th. You go ter sleep anyhow."

"In ther due course ov events, Henry, in ther due course ov events. Not afore. But ef yer don't want yer lam's, hyer, scattered, better tell 'em ter keep th'ir distans tell I'm done with you. They look ez though they wanted ter crowd, an' that'd be bad fur th'ir wool."

Dave Warner would have liked it better if Hardy had not been quite so cool. He had seen at a glance that the tramp was possessed of no mean science; but Hardy did not handle himself like a slouch, either. He hated to seemingly back a beaten man, and yet did not see how or where he could interfere.

And if Hank got in one of those sledge-hammer blows, it would be all up with the man with the rope. It would need no repeating, but put him to sleep past remedy.

He glanced around to see how the crowd was taking this left-handed sort of advice.

To his surprise it had not been thrown away, though from no particular respect for the giver. The men in front crowded back somewhat, so as to give the combatants more room.

The two gladiators came within striking distance again, sparred cautiously in search of an opening; and again Hank let fly, this time left and right.

The first blow was neatly parried, the second was avoided by a swift duck that brought the two almost breast to breast, and Primrose shot out his arms, clasping his antagonist around the waist with a bear-like grasp.

There was an answering clinch from Hardy, and the two men swayed back and forth for a few seconds.

Bedrock had the under-hold, but Hank did not seem discouraged. If there was anything for which he had a reputation it was his wrestling ability, and under-hold or upper-hold, he did not believe there was any man living who could wrest him from his feet.

But in Bedrock he had to do with a strategist of no mean order. First the tramp steadily forced him to throw his weight on his left leg, and then feinted on that one with his right knee, following it up with the real attack from the other side.

Before any one could see how it was done the two men went down with a thundering crash; and Bedrock was on top.

There could be no question but what Hardy's back and shoulders had fairly felt the floor, and Bedrock did not wait for any flurry that might follow, but wrenched himself loose, and sprung to his feet, where he stood with folded arms while Hardy slowly scrambled up.

If any one expected an outburst of wrath, or a hurricane of desperate measures, he was doomed to the most complete disappointment.

"Pard," he said, quite coolly, "I reckon it's a big thing for a man to be able to know when he has been mistooked. I have, and that's a fact. Go and buck faro, if you want to, but for you the limit will be ten dollars for to-night. After this we'll bar you out if yer wins. And ef any man tries to play you foul in my place he'll have to settle with me. I say it, and I mean it. So long. I've got a 'pointment down-town."

He stepped back to the bar, drew on his coat, and left the room before the crowd had got over their first burst of astonishment.

It puzzled Bedrock himself.

"Reckon he cain't mean ter shoot me through a winder," he thought to himself, as he took a keen glance around to see how the land lay.

Every one else appeared to be even more astonished, and for a moment no one seemed exactly certain what was the proper thing to do under the circumstances.

It would not do to laugh too loud, for Hank was a chief yet, and his threat to make Bedrock's cause his own prevented anything like a movement upon the tramp. For a little the conversation hardly rose above a buzz.

"When I've fit with er man I allers like ter drink with him ef he don't mean ter show malice, but it didn't seem it war so ter be. Ther next best thing are ter drink with his frien's. I'm a solid ten ahead on ther game, an' I don't 'bjeet ter blow it in fur ther good ov ther house. Ef thar's ary thirsty mortals 'thin sound ov me voice let 'em p'ram-bulate this way, fur drinks is free ez fur ez ther money goes. Barkeep', set 'em up on both alleys."

The response all around was unanimous enough to be gratifying.

The way they crowded up made it look as though the ten deposited at the bar would not go very far with the stream of thirsty mortals, and while there was a care expressed in the wording of their compliments, more than one expressed his delight at the exhibition that had been given, and the way in which Bedrock had sustained his part in the same.

At the tail end of the procession came one face that was familiar. Honest Pete was there, and seemed anxious to secure his interests before they were gone past remedy,

but at the same time do so without attracting too much attention.

"Well, ef thar ain't Peter!" exclaimed Bedrock, as the fingers that trembled slightly took hold of a tumbler.

"Don't be 'larmed, Peter, me boy. You're under the shadder ov me wing, an' fur ter-night I'm a chief hyer. Hit her heavy, an' hit her of'n. I've a small coin er two back, an' I kin stan' ther blunt fur ther sake ov a ole pard."

He slapped the man of honesty on the back with a heartiness that was unmistakable, and then hob-nobbed with him when he sent down a fair potion of the liquid ruin.

Pete was full of humility, and Bedrock of bounce, but they looked like a well-matched pair as they stood together in the center of the throng. They remained there for some minutes, but as the ten was swiftly evaporating they attracted less and less attention. By and by Bedrock was left without another admirer.

Dave Warner had quietly retired as soon as the fighting was over, and the rest of the crowd did not care for his company when it ceased to offer them any amusement.

Then, Honest Pete gave a wink and a motion, and Bedrock followed him out of the saloon.

"Say, sport, we talked a bit, out yander on ther hill, about bein' pards, an' sence ye hev bucked ag'in' Hank Hardy I guess you'll hev ter come my way, er skip ther town. He b'longs ter Kunnel Randall; an' ef yer touches one ov ther gang yer got ter mount ther balan's."

"W'o's a-keerin'?" asked Bedrock, coolly.

"You an' me ain't, I reckon; but ye see'd how in thar I kinder tried ter sing small. That's ther crowd ez I got ter buck ef I wants ter git me own ag'in, an' w'ot's ter hinder you an' me doin' it tergether? It'll jest be twiste ez easy fur both ov us."

"Put her thar, pard, put her thar!" exclaimed Bedrock, suddenly, extending his hand.

"'Slong ez it are a honest deal, fur punish-in' vice, an' rewardin' virtue, count me in 'long with yer. Now, w'ot's ther racket?"

CHAPTER XII.

DAVE WARNER ACTS AS A KNIGHT ERRANT.

"THAT's the third time I've met the old fellow, and every time he has business by the bushel. He don't appear to have anything against me, but I wouldn't wonder if he would be the death of me yet if I don't get him switched off this trail. It's dollars to dimes it was his rope brought me down on the mountain; but the question is, did he make the cast? It don't look like it, but all the same, I begin to suspect. And what was it all about, anyway? I might have asked the lady of the Silver Seam, and maybe she would have told me, but I never did like to be inquisitive; and if I wait long enough I'll find out anyway."

So thought Dave Warner as he wandered down the street after leaving Hank Hardy's.

After a sight of the crowd which made that place headquarters he did not care to linger. There would be little profit, and no honor, to be gained there, for a sport who had just made his appearance in the town.

It was earlier than he had thought of trying the Silver Seam, but it did seem he had received a hint to turn his steps that way, and thitherward he accordingly bent them.

He had the place already located in his mind, and there would not be the least trouble in finding it.

Indeed, when he looked up he could see by the flaring lamp in front of it the gilded sign above the doorway. He felt disgusted with himself that he had not gone there in the first place.

He did not hasten his steps on that account, and as he came quietly nearer he saw a woman at one of windows, who was evidently trying to get a glimpse of what was going on within.

She gave a little start as she finally heard his step, just at her side, and turning strode toward him.

"Excuse me, sir, as you are a stranger, for speaking to you, but I must go in there; and, I am afraid to go alone."

The voice was a cultivated one, and gave

no indications that its owner was accustomed to visit such places.

"No excuse is necessary, madame; but at the same time I am not exactly the kind of a man you want to pick out for a chaperon, or I am widely mistaken in you. By tomorrow I may have been shot at by half the men of Silverado, and be looked upon as the roughest of bad men, straight down from headwaters. I do not think it would be good for you to be mixed up with me. When the interests of a lady are at stake is the only time I stop to consider, so you will understand it is not from any disinclination to oblige you that I say you had perhaps get a better man."

"Perhaps you are the very man I am looking for of all others. I have a duty to perform, and no false modesty will cause me to throw away a chance in its fulfillment. If money can purchase your protection name your price."

Warner was not sure he had not stumbled upon a female crank, and yet he could not bring himself to believe it. There was an accent of genuine distress in her voice, while her manner did not indicate she was bent upon doing anything very desperate.

"If you can trust me I shall be happy to look after your safety, and I can assure you no one will do aught that will harm you while I am standing by. At the same time, I again suggest it may not be best for you to appear to be under my protection. If you wish to see the inside of the Seam, go in boldly, and I will come immediately in your wake. While you stay there I will be near; but if my services do not seem to be needed you can go your way, and forget you have ever met Dave Warner."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks! You give me courage; for something in your voice tells me you are a man upon whose word I can rely. Keep near me, but do not interfere in my behalf unless it seem imperative. I am going in, now."

They had spoken rapidly, and their conversation had taken no great time. Had any one been near it would probably not have been noticed, yet the woman gave a cautious glance around before she stepped into the line of light which issued from the open doorway.

After that she did not hesitate, but went boldly forward.

At his leisure Dave Warner followed. The adventure, such as it was, seemed rather a strange one, and he did not know what to expect.

He had no difficulty, however, in keeping within supporting distance, and after one glance at the face as seen by the garish light of the saloon, he had no disinclination for the task.

The woman was young, scarcely over twenty if her looks did not belie the fact, and as beautiful as he could have imagined.

There was a blush on her face, born of the unpleasantness of the position in which she found herself, but she never faltered, and swept the room with a steady stare.

The room was not a large one, but it was well filled with men, who, for the most part, looked as though they belonged to the better class of sports and miners.

At the further end was a bar; and on one side of the room a door which led to the gambling-hall. Toward the latter the girl made her way, scarcely seeming to see the men who respectfully stepped out of her way, though they followed her with a look of wonder. Evidently, she was as much of a stranger to them as to Dave Warner.

"She is looking for some one, and I guess knows where to find him. I wonder if there is going to be much of a scene?" thought Dave, as he followed her footsteps as closely as prudence would permit.

"One thing is certain, she will scarcely be molested unless she cuts up some most extraordinary antics. Dell Daly would see to that anyhow, and the sort of men they seem to have here would not let a woman be insulted."

Entering the gambling-room she gave another comprehensive glance, and then went straight toward one of the side-tables at the further end, where a party of four were seated, playing cards.

It would not be so easy to follow closely without attracting attention, but Dave sauntered the same way, glancing carelessly

around, as though without any particular object in view, yet through it all managing to keep a watch on the young lady.

Others were looking the same way, and they as well as Warner saw her approach the table, and bending forward, put her hand on a shoulder of one of the players, at the same time whispering something in his ear.

The man looked up in a lazy sort of way, and stared at the young lady as though she was an utter stranger.

"Excuse me, miss, but I was not listening. What was that you said?"

"You were not listening! Oh, good heavens!" exclaimed the young lady, raising her hand in an excited manner.

"It is now too late. He is already here."

"I am sure I do not understand a word of what you are saying; and sorry though I feel to confess it, I never saw you before in my life. It seems as though you were trying to impress a warning of some kind upon me, but as there is nothing I know of to give me any uneasiness, I am compelled to say your labor is thrown away. Probably you mistake me for a more fortunate man."

The latter part of this conversation was plainly overheard by Warner, who had reached a position quite near; and as he watched the man, his cool assurance made him think that perhaps, indeed, the young lady had made a mistake.

He did not even give a glance around to see who it was might be coming.

"Always reckless; never willing to take a warning!"

Warner heard the girl woman utter the words through her clinched teeth, and he could see her hands were so tightly clasped together the blood seemed to be leaving them.

She could hardly be mistaken, and was evidently very much in earnest.

The man who was actually turning away from the young lady to look again at the cards he held in his hand, was apparently of middle age, and his well-brushed hair showed here and there a thread of gray that proclaimed him a little older than his time.

His face was by no means a bad one, but there was a shifty gleam in his eyes that Warner did not like. He had already begun to identify himself thoroughly with the young lady's interests; and, as her appointed protector, did not fancy her having dealings with such an individual as he fancied this might be.

Still, it would have simplified matters a great deal, if he had only been told who he was, and of what she wished to warn him. The two did not look like husband and wife, but they might be relatives. There seemed to be scarcely wide enough difference in their ages for them to be father and daughter, yet, that was possible. There was no time now to ask questions, but he guessed from what he saw that the two were strangers to the balance of the people in the room, or, at least, the man was but a gambling acquaintance of the three who sat with him at the table.

"Don't let this little incident disturb the game, gentlemen," said the man, as he bunched his hand together again, and looked around the table.

"The lady no doubt means well enough, but she has certainly made a mistake which I am not one to take advantage of by claiming an acquaintance. Mr. Jackson, it is your say-so."

What Mr. Jackson would have said remained unspoken. A stoutly built man with a revolver in his hand came suddenly to the front, slipping out from the crowd.

"Hands up, Dick Avenel, and no nonsense. I'm bound to have you, dead or alive, and the first move you make to draw, down you go."

His pistol was leveled at the man whom the young lady had been trying to warn, and he most evidently held the drop, though Mr. Jackson was hastily shifting out of range.

For any effect they seemed to have he might as well have saved his words. The individual he addressed as Richard Avenel did not even turn his head, or appear to hear him. He simply looked at Jackson with an air of surprise.

"In the name of wonder, what is the matter with you? Have you seen a ghost, or does a royal flush scare you so bad you want to drop your hand and give us poor devils on

the outside a chance to have a little fun by ourselves."

"Look out for yourself, old fellow, and let me get out of the way. It is not my put-in."

Without a better understanding of what was to come, Mr. Jackson did not care to have anything to do with the fracas.

The stranger was not alone, either. Three or four men of rather the rougher stamp were at his back, and they had a serious look on their faces, as though they understood they had a contract of weight to carry out.

Their leader still kept Avenel covered, while they stole past, intending to throw themselves upon their prey.

Then, the girl-woman suddenly threw up the muzzle of the leveled pistol by a swift stroke of her hand, and the report of the discharged weapon rung through the room. Avenel rose, wheeled, and sprung at them like a tiger.

CHAPTER XIII.

"DOWN, IN FRONT!"

If Dave Warner had been around town the night before, and seen anything of the popular rising which threatened to extinguish Bedrock, he would probably have recognized the man who had survived the attempt to take the escaped lunatic prisoner.

As it was, he was all at sea, though more than one man in the room thought he understood the case.

He had promised to stand by the young lady, though, and he certainly intended to keep his word good.

Her quick movement had evidently saved the life of Avenel.

Warner was an expert in such matters, and decided in his own mind that the man meant shoot, and that his finger was already tightening on the trigger when his hand was thrown up.

And that was something which puzzled him somewhat.

In spite of what they were trying to make appear on the surface the real intention was to kill.

If that was the case it was no wonder the young lady thought she would be in danger if she entered the Silver Seam in front of any such procession as this which had appeared.

But Dave had promised nothing in regard to this man Avenel—whose name somehow seemed strangely familiar, though he did not at the moment remember where he had heard it.

He intended, so far as he could keep them separate, to back only the game of the lady, and allow the man to take care of himself, until there were further developments.

For this reason he stepped swiftly toward his charge; and was just in time.

The leader exclaimed:

"Look after him, boys; I will attend to her."

Then he wheeled, and would have caught her by the wrist.

Before his fingers met he would have thought—if he could have thought anything—that he had always been knocked down.

Dave Warner's fist shot out, and caught him well upon the head, and he fell to the floor with scarcely a tremor.

On his side, Avenel met the rush of the four men who sought to hurl themselves upon him, with one of his own a dozen times as savage.

Left and right he struck, and two men went down; but a third dodged, just as the blow that was to fell him started from Avenel's shoulder.

From the force of his own delivery Avenel went swinging around, and though he recovered like lightning it was to find the fourth man on his back, with both arms clasped tightly around him.

At the same time the man who had escaped him came boring in from in front.

Avenel was not even cornered.

He swiftly seized the man behind him, to keep him from getting away, and jammed him firmly against the wall. Then his hands came up, and he delivered a brace of quick, chopping hits on the face of the man in front.

There was no weight behind them, but each stroke cut to the bone, and the fellow, who was not used to that kind of punish-

ment, staggered away, wiping the blood from his face with his wrists, and thoroughly dazed.

That left the one man to be disposed of, and his case received immediate attention.

Avenel reached behind, and drew him in front as though he was a child, caught him by the collar with his left hand, held him out at arm's length, and sent in a right-hander, straight.

"See you later, Jackson," laughed Avenel, after a blood-curdling fashion, and then sprung out of the window which was open, and conveniently near.

"Stop him!" gasped the fellow who had received the lightest punishment.

"It's the man who murdered Burt Jackson. He's mad as a March hare, and if he gets away he'll just keep on killing."

The excitement was at a fever heat among those who witnessed the affair, but somehow none seemed called upon to capture a dangerous lunatic, though some few were willing to rush to door and windows to see him run.

More crowded to the spot where the fracas had occurred; and in the midst of it all the man whom Warner had downed staggered to his feet.

"Give me a show," he muttered, scarcely knowing what he was saying, or what had happened to him.

"I am Sam Sutton, and an officer of the law. I have the papers to arrest him, and last night he killed my pard while we were trying to take him. I call on you all, in the name of the law."

"That hand seems to be good enough as far as Dick Avenel, if that is his name, goes; but where does the young lady come in at? Perhaps, if you had stuck to your regular knitting, you might have come out a heap sight better."

Dave Warner foresaw there might be further trouble, and with his usual straightforwardness took the first opportunity to have the platform of Sam Sutton thoroughly defined.

When Sutton went down before that straightforward blow, the young lady shrunk away and covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out the sight of what was to follow. She was standing with her face half averted, and did not seem to have any knowledge of what had happened, or that Avenel had made good his escape.

The mention of her, however, seemed to rouse her somewhat, and she looked around in a bewildered way.

Sutton understood the address, and turned toward the sport, but apparently without the least knowledge that he was indebted to him for the knocking out he had lately received.

"That is all right enough, too. I hate to interfere with a lady as much as anybody; but this is his daughter, don't you see?"

"And included in the warrant, of course."

That was a straight shot between the eye. Sutton hesitated.

"She has helped him out more than once," he answered at length; "and you can all see she was interfering in his favor just now. She is as much in the mix as he is in the mire, though I want you to understand there is nothing against her except that she has stuck by her father through thick and thin. Until we can cage her there is no use to try to do anything with him. And while you have been standing here chinning me he has got away. After him, boys!"

Up to this time Sutton did not entirely understand all that had happened. As he talked along his excitement grew less, and his brain grew clearer. As he ceased speaking he made a dash for the window, and went out of it with as much agility as Dick Avenel had shown.

In spite of the failures he had heretofore made he was sticking to the trail.

"If you please, will you kindly take me out of this?"

With a quietness he would hardly have expected, the young lady turned to Dave Warner. She had finished her work here, and of course was ready to depart, but he scarcely expected she would call on him to escort her from the house. In his own mind he thought it would have been better for her to have put her case in the hands of the chivalry of Silverado, who would hardly fail a woman who had no greater sin upon

her shoulders than backing her own father, even to the death.

He was ready, however. With a slight nod he stepped forward, and with her by his side moved slowly through the crowd. If any one had cared to interfere there was all the chance in the world.

They went out of the door without a word of opposition. Sutton was nowhere to be seen; such of his henchmen as were about were in no condition to interfere, and no one else felt a call to act.

They left the Silver Seam behind them, the lady leading the way.

"I will not trespass on your goodness for very long. It is not far to the place where I have found a refuge, and I think that there, for a time at least, I am safe. I cannot thank you too much for standing by me, a perfect stranger, so nobly. Had you not struck that man to the floor, as you did, all might have been lost. What madness possessed him to go there I cannot say, but I was determined to warn him, and save him, in spite of himself. If I only could have come sooner."

"Perhaps it turned out for the best as it was," answered Warner, scarcely knowing what to say.

"I need hardly tell you I would not have chipped in on the game of a man who was a perfect stranger unless I saw it was a case of foul play. What I did was for a lady, and not more than any other man would have done. If Mr. Sutton's head aches in the morning he has only himself to blame. His hands were toward you, and not the gent who was so fascinated with the game of draw he did not seem to care for more important interests."

"Always the way with him. If he gets cards in his hands he is mad. He is mad."

"I know plenty of other people who are in the same boat. I'm something of a lunatic myself."

"Yes, but you win," said the lady, with a keen, quick glance in his direction.

"That fact covers a multitude of sins."

"Quite frequently, I confess," laughed Dave, though he was surprised at the shrewdness with which she had read him.

"And you have all the wealth, just now, that you desire?"

The question was asked as though there might be an object behind it, and the sport answered promptly:

"Not just at the present time. Pluck and judgment are with me still, but fickle fortune has lately been going over to the other side. I am down to what in the language of the mines would be called a grub stake, and if I don't strike color soon I will be considerably lower yet."

"Brave, discreet, and a gentleman—you are just the person I was hoping to find. If I can only make you understand the laborer is worthy of his hire I may be able to serve you well, while you can be of no end of use to me. What say you? Are you willing to run some risks, and accept proper compensation for doing it?"

"Not as a matter of business," answered Warner, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"As long as I have a stake for the table I'll stick to the cards. But in the true interests of a lady I am willing to wander a little, and, if I can be of any use to you, command me."

"Let it rest at that for to-night. I will think over my needs, and to-morrow you will hear from me again. For the present my name is Minnie Avenel. What it should be you will perhaps hear later on. Good-night."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VANREDSECKER MILLION.

THE lady who had just given her name as Minnie Avenel vanished so suddenly it would have been hard for a person a dozen yards away to say whither she had gone.

Dave Warner knew, because he was at her side when she started, and because he gave a sideways glance across his shoulder as the door of the neighboring building closed behind her.

Even that glance of his would have scarcely attracted attention or been observed. It was cautiously given because he fancied there was a reason for her sudden disappearance. He passed on with the air of one who never had a companion.

"Wo's yer frien'?" rasped the voice of Bedrock at his shoulder.

"Pears ez though I heard a name; but then, ag'in, me ears may hev d'ceived me. Hevin' fallen inter ther sere an' yaller leaf, things sound twiste ez onnat'ral ez they used ter."

"My friend," answered Dave, with a warning in his voice as well as words, "I have no desire to use harsh measures, but if you keep this thing up much longer I wouldn't be surprised if you heard something drop. You are entirely too fresh for the climate."

"An' he calls me his frien'!" exclaimed Bedrock, rolling his eyes upward, and clasp- ing his hands.

"Good enough. After that I'm almost riddy ter die. It boldens me ter give yer s'uthin' like a warnin'. Wich ther same are thusly. Don't gamble too much on ther game of Miss Minnie Avenel tell yer see me own. I've got a centerest in ther lay-out meself, an' I'd hate ter see a good man euchered with both bowers an' ther king in his hand. So-long; an' don't lead tell yer hears ag'in frum Ragged Rufe."

Warner made a step forward as though he would say something in reply, but the old man never paused for answer, but swaggered away. He had as many styles as he had fingers and toes, and Dave Warner thought he was fated to see them all.

"The infernal ragamuffin! He it was who took the name of Richard Avenel, and he must indeed intend to take a hand in the game. Game there must be, of some kind, and I suppose that as usual I am backing the wrong side, though, with such a man as that against me it looks as though I cannot be so far wrong. Where does Dell Daly come in at, though? Perhaps there would be wisdom in going slow, at least until I hear her side of the matter. And where was she when the fracas was going on at the Silver Seam? Looks strange she did not come to the front. I see nothing better than to go back there again, and learn what I can of the causes of the war. Dick Avenel may be crazy as a bedbug; but I'll bet a big copper that is not the reason why he is being hunted down."

Bedrock was accordingly allowed to make off unmolested, while Warner, communing with his own thoughts, retraced his steps.

If he had followed Bedrock a short distance he would have seen that he was joined by Honest Pete, who was lurking near.

"Did yer git on ter w'ot they war say- in'?" was his salutation, in an eager tone?

"Partly, my frien', partly. Several re- marks concernin' a loonytic, an' a bit ov ex- planashun frum ther gent ez to w'o he might be. She seemed ter be thankin' ov him fur favors rendered, an' mebbe sayin' a eternal good-by. Can't say ez it war w'uth ther reesk. Ef Dave hed caught on ter me a fol- lerin' him he'd 'a' blowed ther top off me brain-box jest ez nat'ral ez life—an' so he orter. Now, fur w'y war this thusly? I did it on your say-so, but I'd like now ter be gittin' a healthy reason fur ther same."

"Kin I trust yer?" asked Pete, hesitating- ly.

"With ontold milliyuns."

"Hyer it be in a nutshell, then. That girl are heir ter a million; an' I don't know that she knows it, an' I don't know but that she knows it. Whichever way it are, it's w'uth coin ter know who she are, an' whar she is. All I'm afear'd ov is thet Kunnel Randall 'll git in his fine work, an' scoop ther pot so clean ther won't be any- thing left fur you an' me ter divvy."

"An' w'ot's he got ter do with it all?"

"Only a onkel, er a cousin, er some other way in ther fambly, an' I feel it in me bones ez he's layin' pipe; an' ef you an' me don't circumvent him he'll make ther stakes."

"Easy ter stop that, pard. Jest pick out a good spot, lay low, an' this hyer rope ov mine, an' that thar knife ov yourn kin do ther rest. Er, ef you kin show me coin ernuff, p'raps I might be willin' ter take ther hull contrack. Eh?"

"No, no! Don't yer never dar' ter do that. It wouldn't be safe, an' we kin do better. You be a new man; w'ot's ther matter with yer gittin' ther kunnel ter take yer in ter ther job. Then you kin play ther hand w'ot pays biggest, with Pete in ther bushes

fur a side-pard. An' hyer's ther p'int thet I didn't orter tell, but I'll let it go ter you. I b'long ter ther fambly meself."

"Sorter prodijal, eh? Bin a-feedin' ther hogs tell ye be purty much ov a hog yerself. But that don't count ag'in' coin. Show me ther royal road ter wealth, an' w'ot more kin you be askin' than a pard w'ot knows beans, an' are willin' ter ontie ther bag?"

"That's so; an' ez I must hev a pard, an' can't look ter git a much higher flyin' one than meself, I guess I better let yer in on ther ground floor, ef so be I know ye'r really able fur ter come in."

"Able? Gracious Scotts! Ef they war a wall a thousand foot high, an' coin on t'other side, you'd see me arrivin' in great shape, ef thar war on'y a weenty knothole, an' that plugged shut. I kin rejuice meself ter the size ov a mouse, er expand ter ther bignitude ov a elephant fur ther sake ov rocks."

"That's bigger ner I kin git," remarked Pete, suspiciously, and drawing back a step to look keenly at his would-be pard.

"Mebbe when ther rifle war made—an' it's a big one—you'd be loomin' up so big yer wouldn't see Honest Pete, an' when yer sot yer foot down he'd go squish?"

"Hope 'may die ef I ain't ez squar' ez McGuire's hotel, an' twice ez solid. Tie to me an' I'll do yer good. Now, thar's bin ernuf ov chinnin'. Open out, er squar' yerself fur a f'out. Ef this are all wind an' 'ligion I'm goin' ter belt yer hot ter make up fur lost time."

"I'm goin' ter trust yer, pard, but yer can't spect me ter go too fur all ter once. We war goin' ter my lay-out when we sighted them two. May ez well perceed afore we begin."

Grumbling a little Bedrock followed the lead of his new pard.

At no very great distance he stopped before a tumble-down shanty, which looked as though it had not had an occupant for a dozen years.

"Hyar's yer palace," he said, with a magniloquent wave of the hand.

"Ef it pleases yer lordship, sposin' yer enters."

"After you are manners—an' sometimes safety. S'pose yer goes ahead an' shows a glim. I've knowed jest sich places w'ot didn't hev bottom onder forty feet, an' when a feller took ther step it war fur good an' all. I knows nothin' ov you 'ceptin' yer honesty; an' I reckon that's b'low par."

The suspicion of Bedrock was not at all unnatural, but it did not anger Peter, who advanced promptly and struck a match, so that Primrose could see the interior of the cabin.

It looked more like a habitable place when viewed on the inside.

There were a couple of blankets, several boxes, and a few cooking utensils. Whatever rights he might have there Honest Pete evidently made it a sort of headquarters.

"Ther fu'niture's frum France—consecwently uncomfortable. Do ther best ye kin. This blanket bez ther biggest holes, but thar's fewer ov 'em. Squat."

Peter had lit a small lamp, such as they use in country hotels to go to bed with. It was not the best in the world to read fine print by, but the light was good enough for present purposes. Bedrock accepted the accommodations while he proceeded to light a pipe.

Then Honest Peter went on with his story, which had been interrupted on the street, and which he now proceeded to treat from a somewhat new point of view.

"Old Dan'l Vanredsecker hed two sons, ov w'ich I am one. Also, he hed a million. W'en he died he left it all to ther daughter ov ther other son, considerin' that ther male members ov ther fambly war both black sheep."

"So fur ez Dirk war concerned that war right; but I warn't a sheep at all, on'y a leetle lam, an' w'ite at that."

"Thar war a cert'in pervishun made fur ther two boys, in case they returned from ther error ov ther ways, but not ernuf ter justify. Ther rest went ter Minnie. On'y, in case her father died, his leetle sheer went to his brother, an' in case they all both, three died, ther hull on it went ter a relative."

"An' that's whayter thinks Randall comes in at. Kay-rect. I kin see it all cl'ar an' clean."

"Hit it fu'st blatter. Randall are ther relative. But thar are a p'int er two ter consider fu'st. Minnie war supposed ter hev gone up ther flume, an' Dirk Vanredsecker, he went along with her, jest in time ter save his neck, ez he would 'a' bin in no end ov trouble ef he hed lingered. Ther residuary relative turned up missin', moreover, an' thar ther matter stan's. An' Honest Peter Vanredsecker—don't you breathe that name to a livin' critter—hez just found out how things went, an' are on ther trail ter straighten 'em out."

"An' now does Ragged Rufe come in?"

"Mebbe you wouldn't mind bein' a long lost brother?"

"You bet I would. Sure ter find me out. Does I look like a Vandredsecker ov ther blue blood?"

"No, an' that war on'y an' idear. I cain't be in six places ter onst, an' I want a man ter be in ther other three ov 'em. Thar's a game, an' I got ter know ther inside ov it afore I kin move. Help me ter find out an' I'll pay accordin' when I git me own."

"Nuf said. Henceforth Bedrock are on ther trail ov fraud an' villainy, an' by ther rollin' w'eels he'll defeat 'em. Gimme yer han' fur ninety days."

They shook hands once more, and then prepared to have the confidential discourse proceed when there came an interruption not down on the bills, so to speak.

With the bound of a tiger, a man sprung into the cabin, caught them up as they sat crouched toward each other, and crushed them together with a force that seemed almost superhuman.

"Not a word, not a whisper!" he hissed into their ears.

"The one who utters one dies."

Honest Peter could not speak, and Bedrock, who had been in such tight places before, would not, so they remained in utter silence, while without they finally heard the voices of men, and the sound of running footsteps approaching the cabin.

CHAPTER XV.

DICK AVENEL CLEARS THE TOWN.

WITHOUT any explanation Bedrock took in the situation.

This man who had grabbed them up as though they were children was the party he had met the night before; while the men outside were the deputies led by Sam Sutton.

As yet Primrose had made no resistance, but he felt pretty sure in his own mind that here was a better man, physically, than himself, and that he would have to kill before that grip could be broken.

Anything of that kind he did not intend to do unless he saw his own safety demanded it; and he began to confess to himself that he was getting into rather ticklish quarters.

He knew nothing of what had but lately occurred at the Silver Seam, but remembered the uprising of the night before, and could see it would be decidedly unsafe to be caught with the man who it was now known had done the killing. He listened anxiously, uncertain what course to take, but pretty sure it would not be long before he would have to decide.

The footsteps concentrated in the neighborhood of the cabin, and he could hear the murmur of voices.

"No, I didn't actually see him, but he was lying there hid, all the same," said one man.

"He bounced out when I went to stir him up, and bolted this way. I could almost swear he went in there. Better surround the place so he can't get away, and then make a search."

"Scatter 'round, you!" decisively commanded Sam Sutton.

"Don't let him close in with you and you are all right. Tap him with your clubs at long range, and don't be afraid you'll hit too hard. He has a skull like an ox, and it will take a pole-ax to down him."

The cabin stood by itself, and it was rapidly surrounded, without any attention to secrecy. The men would rather have preferred their game to break cover if he was actually in the hut, for no one had any desire to go rooting around for the maniac—if such he was—in the dark.

All remained quiet within, and Sutton had begun to believe there was a mistake as he approached the door.

He tried it, and it swung open without the least resistance, though all within seemed quietness and emptiness.

"Hello there, Dick Avenel! We have you cornered and you may as well throw up your hands and be done with it. You know I'll treat you white, and if you get away now the whole community will just go gunning for you, and sooner or later some one is bound to bring you down."

No answer.

"All right. If you're not there it won't do any hurt, and if you are there we are bound to have you if it is in cold meat shape. Boys, two or three of you come here and empty your pistols. Scatter the shots around pretty well, and see if you can't hit something. I don't like to set fire to the old shanty, but I don't want to risk too much, and if lead don't bring him out we'll see what smoke and fire will do."

"Better have a light first, so we can see what we are doing," suggested one of the men who stepped forward at the bidding.

"We might be shooting in there all night and never hit him once."

"And if he had that same light he would be shooting out here, and you can stake your bottom dollar he never would miss. Look out! Here he comes now!"

The body of a man came shooting toward the doorway, plunged out, collided with Sutton, and dropped in a heap, with hands upraised.

"Fur mussey's sake don't shoot, it are Honest Pete, that's my shebang, an' he's in thar yit. Go fur him er he'll git away!"

At Sutton's threat Avenel had shifted his hold, caught Pete up neck and thigh, and cast him toward the open door.

It was a chance some killing was not done on the spot, but fortunately the fellow was recognized in time.

Then, too, his warning, which was believed readily enough, directed attention from himself, and doubtless saved him some kicks and cuffs of disappointment.

There was a rush toward the door, and Honest Pete was for a moment left to his own devices.

Then, to the rear of the cabin a single shot pealed out on the night air, followed by a gasping groan; and the rush fell back from the door, and streamed around that way, just in time to see a man dashing off for dear life, and already a score of yards or more away.

There was no mistaking the squarely built figure, and with a view-hallo Sam Sutton led the charge that followed after.

"A nice, comfyble trap, that, yer hev rigged up in thar," said Bedrock, shrugging his shoulders as he came out when the last man had got beyond hearing distance.

Pete was still gasping where he sat, all crouched up on the ground. When he had left Dick Avenel's hands he was in a crumpled condition, and had not as yet recovered his breath.

He stared up at the man with a rope as though he did not recognize him, and muttered something which the other did not exactly catch.

"Oh, yes, it's all right fur you, but ef they hed kin acrost me thar would 'a' bin sure death. They'd 'a' bin takin' me fur his pard, same ez they did las' night, an' salt wouldn't 'a' saved me. An' me a never-a-see-in' ov him afore. W'o is he, an' w'ot's it all about?"

The shake he gave Peter aroused him somewhat, and he rose slowly to his feet.

"How—how did yer githyer?" he gasped.

"Thort you went outen ther winder afore he got me through ther door."

"So I did, but when he come-out like a ragin' lion I jest drapped a blamed fool ez war goin' ter take a shot at some ov us, he didn't keer much w'o; an' then jumped back. They hed ernuf bizziness on hand 'thout tendin' ter Bedrock, an' hyer I be, right side up with keer. But I don't like ther climate, an' I'm goin' ter move on. You better kin too. I'd ez soon deal with ther loonytick ez ther crowd ez are arter him, an' they all both may be a-comin' back. Brace up, now, an' cumulate a move."

Pete did not have any inclination to linger near the spot. His belongings in the cabin were not so valuable that it would make much difference if the crowd came back to wreck the place, and they would hardly at-

tract the cupidity of any one who was in search of plunder. He did not even take time to close the door, but hurried away without a word.

"Is he on to me?" were the first words he uttered, and those not till they had got a dozen rods from the spot.

"Cain't say, but I should jedge he warn't on ter much ov anything but ther savin' ov his own bacon. But he's a screamer. I hev s'uthin' ov a grip meself, but he takes the cake. He's too hot fur me."

Bedrock actually heard the shudder with which Pete acknowledged the truth of his words.

"I dunno, but I hope so. Ef he's comin' visitin' 'round that ranch I'll be lookin' fur a new lay-out. I hope they'll find him."

"D'unno. Pore cuss! They be so dre'ful in earnest he mout' kill a few, er half a dozen afore they found it out. Better let him jump ther camp an' look out fur a game ez ain't jest so excitin'."

"But, does he live 'round hyer?"

"Can't prove it by me, though some says he's jest got outen a asylum, an' others thet he ain't ez mad ez he looks, an' are captain ova gang in ther mount'ins. Ef I war put on me billydavit I'd swar he war both, with a section ov ther Old Boy throwed in. They had him, onst', not so long ago, but he got away. I'm on'y hopin' they git him ag'in. Now, talk ov s'uthin' else. It don't bring no luck ter be jabberin' ov him. Ef it ain't askin' too much, wot's yer game hyer? You be too good a man ter hev nothin' in view but slingin' a lass' rope fur drinks."

"Betcher sweet soul I be, but tell I struck you nothin' else offer'd. I'm gittin too fat ter ride, an' too sassy ter be bossed, er I mout' be on ther ranges whar by natur' I b'long. Ez a cowboy I war a howlin' success tell I bergun ter weigh a ton, an' then hoss flesh war too weak ter kerry me. But, kim on! I do b'lieve ther band's a-strikin' up ag'in, an' ef we don't russel we'll be too late fur ther music."

It seemed as though the man must have doubled back and reached the center of the camp once more. They heard shouts and shots, and running feet.

"Not any fur me," was Pete's answer.

"Ef they ketch us 'round ag'in they'll hang us both. You better stay whar it's safe, an' I'll keep yer company."

At the same time he crouched back and drew his revolver, peering anxiously into the darkness.

"Yer may be honest ez ther day, but I don't think much ov yer sand," retorted Primrose, and he hurried away, leaving his whilom pard where he had halted.

He had gone no great distance when there was a shrill whistle from the point of disturbance, and that was answered by another that rose just as sharply, while immediately after there was a rush and clatter of horses' hoofs, and a chorus of shouts, which did not come from the throats of Sam Sutton's followers, or those of the men of Silverado who were joining in the hunt.

Half a dozen horsemen came at headlong pace down the main street, though where they had been in hiding was a mystery.

In their front rode a man with a led horse, saddled and bridled, but riderless. His own animal he guided with his knees, while with the revolver in his right hand he fired shot after shot, without seeming to take aim.

The men of Silverado scented a raid, and were quick to take cover.

The street was cleared in an instant, and there was not yet time for them to open fire from behind the boxes, and around the corners, when Dick Avenel sprung into sight, bounded into the middle of the street, and with the agility of a circus rider leaped into the saddle of the led horse.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed, as the mounted squad dashed forward.

"You are all mighty anxious to down the mad outlaw, but when he comes you'll hunt your holes before the racket begins. *Au revoir!*"

And with clatter and crash the troop swept out of the town, Dick Avenel at the head.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BRACE GAME AT THE SILVER SEAM.

JUST one shot followed the outlaws as they swept by, and if that was aimed at Avenel, it missed its mark.

One of the riders came gliding in between, and at the critical moment his shoulder was in line. At the report he fell forward, though still clinging to his horse, and he kept his place with the rest.

Bedrock shrugged his shoulders, but said nothing. Unless he was wide off, the shot came from Honest Pete.

"A miss are good ez a mile, an' we'll let it go at that; but, ef he hed hit him in ther back, I wouldn't 'a' stopped much ter hev gone back an' took him over me knee. Guess I ain't no use fur this crowd, though, an' I may ez well take ter kiver at ther Silver Seam. Fun out doors be about over, an' it's time fur it ter begin inside."

But things were very quiet at the Silver Seam.

Dell Daly had not put in an appearance for the evening, and though it was after the time when she usually opened the bank the lay-out had not yet been spread. Several private games of poker were going on, but there were not many loungers in the room devoted to games of chance.

The bar, however, was doing a good business, and the crowd around it was rapidly increasing as the men came in from the street.

Of course, there was a great deal said about the affair in the saloon, and the subsequent racket near Honest Pete's cabin, and Bedrock heard more than one story concerning the mad outlaw, who had so coolly rung into a game with three men of Silverado, and progressed so well in their good graces that they had almost forgotten he was a stranger.

If he was as black as painted by some he was a very hardened sinner; but as most of the incidents related occurred at a distance, Primrose took them with several pinches of salt.

In the midst of it all a slight buzz announced the entrance of the Card Queen.

As was sometimes her custom, she wore a black half-mask of silk, but there was no mistaking her figure, or the short-skirted walking costume with which the camp was familiar enough.

"Better late than never," she said, as she daintily swung herself through the crowd, with a nod to the right and left, without signaling any one especially with that mark of favor.

"Had a little engagement down-town that kept me a bit longer than I intended. Hear there have been fine things going on while I was away, but if Dell Daly knows herself there will be no more of them around here while she is to the fore. Get ready to make your game, gentlemen, the bank will open."

She seated herself behind the table as she spoke, Pat Kirton, her right-hand man, put things in order, and slowly the slender fingers shuffled the cards.

For a while the playing was by no means vigorous.

The men who generally crowded the betting had not yet come in, and with those who bet a dollar or two to pass away the time, or economize their chances, fortune distributed her favors after a fashion which left no one very much a winner or loser at the end of the first half-hour.

Then, a new man took up the game just about the time the others were beginning to drop out. With an imperturbable smile on his face Colonel Randall took his place at the table, and from the stack of chips he displayed at his elbow it might have been guessed that he intended to win or lose heavily.

"What's the limit to-night?" he asked, shortly.

"The game chops around so here one never knows whether it's the Bank of California backing the house, or the house running wide open; or if it is a little tin-pot game to catch suckers. Excuse me, Miss Daly. I didn't want to be personal, but I guess you can afford to hear a little truth, once in a while."

"You ought to know, by this time, Colonel Randall, that the limit is fifty dollars. We will raise it for you to-night, and allow you to go it wild. The king is in the door, and bets are in order. How many thousand are you going to stake on the hazard of the next turn?"

"Oh, I'll come after you fast enough

when the thing gets to moving, but just now we'll go slow till we see how the cat hops."

And the colonel deposited fifty dollars' worth of chips on the ten, and then folded his arms, and watched the card with a careless look, while Bedrock, who had moved up to a spot where he could command a good view of the game, watched him in turn.

The box was nearly empty, and it did not take long to come to the end of the deal, or, for that matter, to rake up the colonel's fifty dollars, since his card came out soon on the losing side.

Then, the Card Queen shuffled the cards once more, and when she had weaved them listlessly together threw them down in front of Randall to be cut.

"B' thunder, he's ther boss hisself!" thought Bedrock, as he watched a deft movement of the long and well-kept fingers, which would have been invisible to eyes less keen, and less informed.

"Betcher sweet soul she's onto his game, an' hez laid a trap fur him that he's goin' re'ely ter despise."

And he chuckled to himself as he thought of the disgust of the military-looking sport when the turn came out the wrong way.

He felt well assured that the colonel knew about where to find his cards, and when he stacked up two hundred in chips he thought he knew how he was placing it and only leaned forward as a matter of habit.

Somewhat to his surprise the checks were on none of the cards he remembered as trimmed.

"Reckon they are too far back, an' he's starting with a ruse ter 'count fur bigger bettin' later on. I want ter git whar I kin see him open his eyes when things don't come out ez they o'rter."

Nothing troubled the colonel as the deal went on, for he won as steadily, and rapidly as he could have wished, and before the last turn he was already a thousand dollars ahead of the bank, and his luck running right along without a break.

Then, he strung all his chips for the turn, and looked over at the dealer with a curious smile on his hard, thin lips.

The mask concealed the features of the dealer, but Bedrock fancied her fingers trembled just a little as she pulled the first card from the box.

A buzz went 'round from the lips of the men who were watching the game.

As the card left the box, and the next one came into view, they could see that so far Randall was still in the van. His chances were now even to win four times his stake, and, in fact, most of the players there would have been glad to back his game. It was more than even money his streak had not been played out.

Bedrock scratched his head and looked serious.

"Blame me ef this ain't runnin' a game too-cussed squar'. She knowed they hed run 'em in, an' war too blamed modest ter take 'em out. Unless she's worked a double cross et looks ez though she hed better tie up gamblin', an' go fur a foreign mis'hunary. Ez a speller, she ain't no success."

Bedrock's thoughts were kept to himself, and he noted a little pause that looked as though Miss Daly were bracing herself for what was to come next.

Colonel Randall took advantage of it, anyhow.

"The limit of the bank is generally five thousand, and it looks as though I had it pretty well closed up now. If, however, the bank, or any outside gentleman, would like to place, say five thousand, against my chances on the deal, here's the money which will cover their coin, and back my judgment."

"I never give or take credit," said Miss Daly, seemingly making some effort to remain cool.

"There's not enough to cover that wad of greenbacks in your fist, but as far as it goes, I'll see your bluff. Patsy, ask Timmy to turn out the hoodle."

The wait only continued a moment longer.

Then, taking the thick roll of bills from Kirton's hands, she threw it on the lay-out, by the side of the colonel's chips, and pulled the cards.

And the colonel won.

Regard for the feelings of the popular Card Queen alone prevented a cheer that would have lifted the roof off. It makes even a piker feel good to see the bank lose. It is a sign that luck may come his way some day.

"I felt that it was my night on," said the colonel, airily, "and I don't like to stop when the evening is young. Suppose, Miss Daly, that you take five thousand in chips, to represent the value of the Seam, and hit them again."

"Suppose I do," answered the lady.

"What good is the Silver Seam without the capital to carry it on. If I lose, I reckon you will want a dealer, and I'll be wanting a job, so I'll stand the risks and accept your offer. I never knew a shoestring to run up to the limit of the bank that it didn't run down to a shoe string again, if you only gave it time."

"Something in that. Patsy, give us a fresh deck, and maybe it will change the luck."

The colonel looked at Pat with a smile, but Kirton knew what that went for. If the colonel won the Silver Seam he would be the first man fired. The colonel and he had trouble once upon a time.

The new pack was thrown upon the table, and Randall picked it up carelessly.

"And if you want to try the effect for what it is worth, suppose I take the box, and you exercise yourself picking out the winning cards. Perhaps we both have a little curiosity to see how it would go to be on the other side of the table."

"Not this evening; some other evening," smiled Miss Daly, drawing herself up.

"I wouldn't give the advantage of the splits for all the judgment I have; and I'm so used to it that it don't tire me a bit to pull the cards. I guess we will stay as we are."

She picked up the deck, threw the cards together once or twice, offered them to be cut and then the game went on.

CHAPTER XVII.

BEDROCK SWINGS HIS ROPE.

BEDROCK's ponderous jaws set together with a savage firmness as the last of Dell Daly's five thousand disappeared at the close of that remarkable game.

He was not given in his soul to sudden fancies, whatever he might from time to time say with his lips, but he had actually taken a strong liking to the fair owner of the Silver Seam.

She had stood by him when he needed help, in spite of his rags; and had said nothing when he admitted to her he had brought her into so much danger on what was practically a wild-goose chase.

In addition, she had the nerve he always delighted to honor, even when it was turned against himself.

Only, he could not understand the remarkable game which he had just seen played to its ending.

"She must 'a' forgot ter change ther decks, an' when ther crisis come felt it'd never do ter squeal. Er, mebbe, she war goin' ter 'xpose ther kunnel, an' when ther time come weakened. He looks like a 'okard man ter run ag'in, but she orter counted on ole Bedrock, an' then she'd 'a' knowed she had a host behind her. I must git a word with her, anyhow. Ef better cain't be did I'll start her ter runnin' a oppersishun game right acrost ther street, ter-morrer night; an' I'm bettin high she kin draw ther trade, an' Ragged Rufe won't suffer."

He spent a little too much time cogitating.

With a graceful bow Miss Daly relinquished her hold on the box when she saw the last dollar swept away, and arose.

"Gents!" she said, without a trace of regret in her tone:

"You have always treated me white and square, and I hope you will extend the same courtesies to the new hand. Good-evening, all. I think I will retire from the trade."

Then, the Card Queen whispered to Kirton that all back wages would be paid in the morning, and affairs closed up without any one being the loser.

After that, with a brace of bows as comprehensive as those with which she entered, she glided through the crowd which opened respectfully for her to pass.

Condolence was scarcely in order, and

Charlie Fairbanks, the boss and part owner of the Happy-Go-Lucky, was the only man who tried something of the kind.

"That's all right, my friend," she answered, waving him off.

"You mean well, but there's no sense in it. I'll see you later."

So it was she passed away from the Silver Seam, very much like a dethroned queen might have done, unheralded and alone.

With Dell Daly out of the room there were plenty there to crowd around the wonderful winner, and extend their congratulations after the most fulsome manner.

The colonel rose equal to the occasion. He put on no side, and made the speech which was altogether best suited to the occasion. He had already pocketed the pocketable portion of the spoils, and now he turned to the crowd, refusing to meet any single eye.

"Gentlemen," he said, "follow me. The bar is well stocked, and for this evening I propose it to run wide open."

The change of proprietorship was already known all over the house, and Timmy offered no objections when he was told to set them up for everybody. He twirled the tumblers along the bar with just as ready a grace as though Miss Daly was still at the front, and issuing orders, and he stood watching the gang assembled in front with the same kindly smile which had for so long been endearing him to the hearts of the men of Silverado.

It was nothing to him if the man at the extreme right changed places with the man to the far left before filling his glass again, and that the men between exchanged situations generally. He did not understand that the guests were limited to the one drink apiece; and if they had been he would not have seriously objected to the colonel being euchered a few dozen times in the matter. Like Pat Kirton, he had no great love for him.

"The bank is closed for the night," said the colonel, "but gentlemen can go on with their short cards, and after the crowd goes full you can run the bar as usual. You will sleep here to-night, Tim, and be on hand for business in the morning? It couldn't be in better hands."

Tim nodded, and the colonel went out—but he had been preceded by both Bedrock and Dave Warner.

Dave had no such pointers on the game as did Primrose, but he had eyes and judgment, and scented something wrong.

It seemed like nonsense to ventilate his opinions to Miss Daly, but all the same, he felt like airing them. Of course, there would be little chance to get the colonel engaged in a quiet game of draw for reasonable stakes so soon after such signal winnings, so there was nothing to keep him there.

"Where did she go to?" he muttered as he looked around vainly to get a glimpse of the trim figure he had expected to see.

"Seems to have vanished in a mighty big hurry. Well, I don't know that she would want much to see me. I haven't the coin to set her up in business, and if I had she would think I was fresh if I offered it. So far, Silverado is not panning out well, though perhaps it's my own fault. The colonel is my meat, and till I get a chance at him I don't propose to tackle any lesser game."

He knew how important it was either to establish a reputation as a high-roller, or to escape notice altogether, and so, proposed to kill time for the balance of the evening, or till he thought he could turn in for the night with a fair chance of getting to sleep.

Acting on this decision he wandered aimlessly around, finally bringing up at McGuire's, and was just making up his mind he was ready for bed when he caught sight of a feminine figure gliding along the street.

The view as had through the window was only a fleeting one, and sharp as was his eyesight he was puzzled.

At first he thought he had seen Dell Daly; and then he about made up his mind it was Minnie Avenel.

One of the two he was certain it was, and he suddenly decided he would know which.

Without stopping to think how the act would be received he hurried out, and after the lady, who could still be dimly seen at a little distance.

He strode away in pursuit with a swinging stride, but soon found the lady was going along much faster than he had supposed, and that he was actually losing ground.

He was disgusted with himself, and would have quickened his steps, but at that moment caught sight of a skulking figure which rose up between them. He was not certain, but it looked as though this party was also in pursuit of the young lady, and, from the way he glanced around, that he would be an unwelcome and perhaps a dangerous follower. It began to look as though Warner's sudden freak had been providential.

"It's the Avenel girl for a thousand," he thought to himself.

"She is pretty nearly in the same neighborhood where I parted from her, and unless the fellow closes up rapidly she will have time enough to get away from him, but all the same I may as well see the adventure to the end. She may need me, and if she does I would just as soon be around. He is hard enough looking case to scare a saint, and must be a companion tramp to the fellow with the rope."

The lady moved on fast, the tramp faster, and Dave Warner fastest of all. So far, she had not noticed she was followed; or, at least had given no sign of being aware of the fact.

The fellow must have stepped noiselessly as a cat, for she gave a little cry of surprise and dismay as his hand fell on her shoulder.

He began to speak; but before he had the first word fairly uttered she had wrenched herself away from his hand and sprung aside, and just then the Dead Game Sport called out sharply:

"Steady as you are, there, Mister Man. I have you lined."

The sharp click of a pistol accentuated his words, and the man wheeled at the sounds, disclosing the battered features of Honest Pete.

Dave Warner felt more anger than he really would have cared to admit, considering the style of the object which had aroused him.

His pistol was still leveled, and his eyes fairly sparkled in the bright moonlight.

"You worthless hound! What do you mean by insulting a lady? If I drilled you through you would be all paid for, and for half cent I would do it. Down on your marrowbones and beg."

"Fur m'ussey's sake, don't shutel!" wobbled out Pete; and then—swish came the noose of Bedrock's rope, settling around Warner's arm, and the next instant his hand was jerked aside, and he himself half turned around to face the great irrepressible.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MIDNIGHT RAID.

"SHERRY yer nibs, podner, w'ile I hole him tight. Ef he ever gits loose I wouldn't give a dime fur yer chainces."

The exclamation of Bedrock had its instant effect. Without waiting to see what became of the man with the rope, Pete took to his heels, and disappeared before Dave Warner had fairly recovered from his surprise. Primrose was left to make his peace alone.

"Yer owes me one, pard, fur hevin' saved yer frum puttin' his dirty name on yer record. I see'd he war crouchin' low fur a mighty spring, an' I knowed you war on ther shoot ez large ez all outdoors, an' so I saved yer. But, 'nother minnit an' I'd 'a' bin too late."

The pistol had fallen from Warner's hand when the rope encircled his wrist.

Bedrock, casting off the noose with one hand, picked it up with the other, and handed it over to the sport as carelessly as though it had been a block of wood.

"I don't know why I don't shoot you with it," snarled Dave, as he received the weapon. "You have done enough to deserve it."

"In course; but d'servin' merit ain't al-lers rewarded in this world. An' things'll take a turn, by an' by, an' you'll on'y be too glad to see ole Bedrock a-comin' with his rope. Honest Injun! I'm a-studyin' that man, an' I think I kin learn p'int's from him. I wouldn't lose him fur a dollar, an' somehow I see'd s'uthin' in yer face thet tole me either him er you'd be a dead man ef I didn't chip."

"What do you take me for? You don't suppose I would let blizzard at a case like that, for pure fun and ugliness. I only drew on him because I couldn't reach him. If I had been a few yards closer he would never have known what hit him."

"Kayreck, podner; but I wa'n't so sure ov him. Ett's ther onexpected w'ich allers happens, and Petey kin be ez savage as a meat-ax. W'en his fingers commence ter w'uk 'round to'rads his hip-pocket ett's time ter be up an' a-doin'. Very much ov a bite are that same Petey."

There was a genuine frankness about Bedrock's tones which disarmed wrath, and made Dave in a better humor in spite of himself.

"You make me awful tired, old man, but somehow I can't help thinking you are better than your looks, and that it may pay to save you up till we can see what you amount to. I saw you in at the Seam, watching the game while the colonel skinned the bank; what do you think of it?"

"I think thet thar's nothin' so relievable ez bettin' on a dead sure thing, ef nothin' goes wrong, an' ther keyards kim outen ther box ez they orter. More than that this court ain't inclined ter reemark ontill ther case comes afore it in a regular way. He yer goin' my way, er do yer count on standin' hyer till mornin' ter see ef Petey kims back?"

"The levelness of your head is only equaled by the solidity of its brass. I think I'll go home, and try the bed that is waiting for me. I'll hardly ask you to go along, but if you are in need of shelter I can find you a place to bunk."

"Thanks fur ther gentle hint, but I can arrange me own household. W'en I'm at home I sleep on Fifth avenue, but out hyer, behind ther pigpen 'll do. So long!"

Bedrock strode away in the direction probably taken by Honest Pete, while Warner retraced his steps, puzzling his brains over what Primrose had said in regard to the game at the Seam, and wondering whether it could be possible there had been an understanding between the banker and the winner. It was only the night before Dell Daly had wondered whether the colonel was her friend, and he had half promised to find out.

He looked around him as he went, with a faint idea that Pete might materialize again, but he saw nothing more of the man of honesty for the night.

An hour or two later, when he had been solidly asleep for some time, he was aroused by the sound of shots—half a dozen of them, or more.

He was accustomed to such noises, and as his friends in the place were few, he did not feel called upon to investigate. He turned over and went to sleep again.

The next day, however, he heard an explanation of the noise which made him wish he had been possessed of a little more curiosity.

Dell Daly was missing; and so far as could be gathered from the few people who professed to have been on the street, her taking off occurred in the middle watches of the night, though they did not understand it at the time.

The first intimation they had that anything was wrong was when half a dozen men came riding down the street at headlong speed.

When they halted a man came out from the shadow of a building, carrying some thing on his shoulder. He was helped upon a led horse, and then the outfit dashed away.

So far, everything was done as silently as possible, but when some one who was observing things made a step in that direction, there was a regular fusillade of fire arms, and though no one was hurt, for a little while bullets were flying about like hailstones.

No one doubted that the outlaw and his men had come back; and the general supposition was that Miss Daly had been carried off for ransom, Dick Avenel not being aware of the sudden turning of fortune's wheel which had cost her all her available coin, and the Silver Seam besides.

"Our friend of the mountain-side has got his work in this time," was the thought of Dave Warner, as he listened to the story.

"I owe him one or two for the treatment I received up there, and I guess I will have to take a hand in. He didn't seem just so crazy while he was overhauling my effects, and flashing his infernal match in my face, but if I must go on the war path, he'll be mad enough before I get done with him."

Still, he was in no haste to begin the quest, and did not allow anxiety for the fair prophetic of faro to interfere with the squareness of the breakfst which he stowed away. It was an old maxim of his never to start an important piece of business in a hurry, and he lived up to it in spite of the excitement in Silverado, and the fact that when he first put his nose out of the door, half a dozen mounted men led by Colonel Randall were just setting out on the trail of the outlaws.

"Ef they kin find it," suggested Bedrock, who came lounging up, his ready rope slung in a coil across his shoulder.

"Ef I war you, an' reely war in earnest fur fun, I wouldn't go with that crowd, no-how. Reckon I'll go alone, all by me lone-some self. P'rhaps you wouldn't like ter go along?"

"If you can show me sign—as long as you stick to the trail," answered Dave, with a searching glance at the face of the bummer.

"Perhaps you would like to wring your 'podner 'into the outfit?"

"So I would, but I cain't find him, an' that's ther myst'ry ov it. Bin 'round to his cabin an' he ain't thar. Nobody hes see'd hide ner huff ov him. You ain't made 'way with him, hev yer?"

"Scarcely," was Warner's answer, as he turned away, and went in for his breakfast. He was thinking he might find a worse partner than Ragged Rufe, if he was only sure he could depend on him.

When he stepped out on the street again he had both of his revolvers belted on, and carried a haversack. He had heard all that was to be heard, and had decided to look the ground over, and follow sign if he saw it.

When Dave Warner took one end of a trail he never stopped till he reached the other.

Accompanied by a man who professed to be able to point out the exact spot where the abduction had taken place he drifted down the street, talking as he went, and was somewhat surprised to see that they halted at length in front of the house which had twice received Minnie Avenel.

"Hyers whar ther fun begun," was the explanation of the guide.

"Reckon Dell hed a private lay out ov her own hyer, what we didn't know nothin' about. Silverado hez been thinkin' ther she-bang war empty fur a month, though I'll allow no one war watchin' it very hard. An' right up that way, to'rads ther mount'ins went ther gang, a-shoutin' an' a-shootin'. Ef yer want ter strike 'em, that's yer route. Kunnel Randall an' ther boys was up an' a-movin' an hour ago, an' I wouldn't be wonderin' ef they held 'em till you come."

The fellow did not have a very high opinion of the stranger sport's chances for seeing the game, but as his services were altogether gratuitous he had the right to jest a little, and Dave overlooked the fling.

"Thanks, my friend," he quietly answered.

"I'll see you have the full history of the racket when I get back, and if the colonel waits long enough there is a chance the mad outlaw will catch up with him. He is just as likely to be met with prancing around here, as up in the mountains. I think I'll choose a little easier route."

"An' that's whar your head's level," said Primrose, with whom he stood face to face, as he turned away.

"Our best hold are ter head 'em off; an' it's goin' ter be a mighty dellycate affair ter git ther lady 'thout hurtin' him. Yer sees thar's more in this than 'pears on ther su'f'us, an' ez I'm all gone on ther conquest ov villainy, an' ther vict'ry ov virtue, I don't want ther shootin' ter begin tell we kin git a toller'ble fair sight through ther center ov ther grin'stone."

"Excuse me, but the rescue of Miss Daly is the first thing to be thought of. After that you can air your opinions on criminal economy."

"Thet's it. Thet's jest it. But ther female ez war kerried off warn't Dell Daly at

all, but ther young lady ez calls herself Minnie Avenel. I want ter know whar they both went to."

CHAPTER XIX.

A WELCOME HOME.

HOWEVER much the theory was a surprise to Dave Warner, Bedrock had, as usual, "hit the nail on the head the first clatter."

The young lady who had been carried off by the mad outlaw was none other than the one piloted into the Silver Seam early in the evening, by Dave Warner; and who, some hours later, had been protected by him from the apparently unwelcome advances of Honest Pete.

It was another mystery of which as yet Silverado was all unsuspecting.

Minnie Avenel, hurrying along the street, had been unaware she was followed up to the last moment.

When, by chance, she caught a glimpse over her shoulder of the man of honesty it came very near being fatal to him.

Her breath came a little quicker, and her hand dove into her bosom, and closed upon the handle of the small revolver she carried there. When his hand touched her shoulder she was about to draw it and fire, but the voice of Dave Warner caused her to hesitate. She had already shaken herself free, and as Pete wheeled at the sharp challenge she fled away like the wind, darting around the house, in front of which she had been halted, and entering by a rear door, a key to which she drew with trembling fingers from her pocket.

Once within, she closed the door, and stood motionless, waiting to hear the report of fire-arms she thought was sure to come. She was trembling, but her courage came back rapidly, and when she had lit a lamp a little later the light showed a puzzled look on her face.

There was a sound of voices without, but they were not raised in anger, and she turned the light down, so that her shadow would not betray her, and pulling up the corner of a thick blind a little, peered out.

Two men were there, talking, and one of them she recognized as Dave Warner, but she was pretty sure the other was not the man who had accosted her. There was a resemblance, to be sure, but this fellow she had seen about the street before, and recognized him on the instant, while about the other there had been nothing familiar.

"They look as though they were going to make a call, to see after my precious health," she laughed, her lips moving in a whisper.

"If they do they will hardly find me at home, though I would not object to seeing more of my dashing knight errant if time and place were more suitable. It was the only thing I could do, to scream; but I begin to suspect it would have been better if these gentlemen had been a little further off, and had their eyes turned the other way. The tramp may have been genuine, but then, again, he may have been some one else. I didn't give him time to be recognized, and if the gent in the high hat had not come to the rescue I would have shot him first, and—never regretted it heartily afterwards."

She said the last with a sigh, and watched Bedrock and Warner separate and move off before she left the window.

"If it was he I suppose he will be back again, and I may as well wait to see if he is coming," was her somewhat enigmatical remark as she sunk into a chair, and leunged back as though she had been thoroughly tired by work that was hard, and not altogether to her mind.

In spite of herself, her eyes closed, and she was just sinking into a doze when aroused by a low tap at the rear door.

"It is time he was coming," she thought, as she rose, and stepped to the door.

This was scarcely strong enough to withstand any vigorous attack from an enemy, so it was more a matter of form than of caution that she asked:

"Who is there?"

"Your share of the spoils," was what she heard, and opening the door a little, as though still in doubt as to whether it was safe or not, a package was thrust through, which she took without hesitation, or an abatement of her caution.

"You would have it, but it has been some risk to bring it here, and I suspect some of those infernal intermeddlers are on the watch even now. Look out you don't lose your plunder; and I will see you as soon as it is safe. If they are watching I guess they are not making much out of this interview. By-by, and take care of yourself. You will hear from me to-morrow."

The voice was like none she had ever heard, and not so much as the tip of the nose of the man outside was visible, but the package was all right. She shut the door without even taking the trouble to say good-night.

Then, examining the little bundle by the faint gleam of the lamp, she counted out something less than five thousand dollars in notes.

"Just as well to clean up the proper share of the proceeds as we go along. Life out here, and especially his life, is too terribly uncertain to allow him to carry the entire capital of the firm. This is a pretty fair start for the partnership; let us hope business will continue to prosper. I think I can sleep soundly, now."

The rough bunk in one corner of the room scarcely seemed the most fitting of places for a lady of her appearance to rest in, but she threw herself upon it without a murmur, all dressed as she was, and with the package of money under her head, and a revolver lying ready to her hand, was soon asleep.

Visitors around this building—which the inhabitants of Silverado, so far as they thought on the subject, supposed to be uninhabited—appeared to be plenty.

When the young lady had been slumbering for a couple of hours the door was gently tried.

The party outside was evidently a practiced hand at midnight visitations, for after a momentary respite the key turned slowly and silently in the lock, and then the door opened revealing the form of a man upon the threshold.

He listened intently, located the sleeper by the sound of her breathing, and tip-toed across the floor until he stood at her side.

"Not a word, not a whisper," he sternly commanded, in a low, tensely strung voice, as his hand settled upon her shoulder.

"You claim to be Dick Avenel's daughter, and it is time you were going home."

Her eyes were wide open, staring at him, as he spoke these last words, and it was evident that in the man before her she recognized the mad outlaw.

"What do you mean by this intrusion?" she gasped, attempting to rise, yet at the same time furtively feeling for the revolver which seemed somehow to have slipped away from its place.

"Going to take it coolly, are you? Good! You can listen to reason. You know I don't care for a life any more than I do for the snap of my thumb."

"I—I do not understand."

"Not necessary at all. As Dick Avenel's daughter it's not to be supposed that you would. All you want to understand is that you are to keep still. Ah! Here they come."

He caught her up, blanket and all, and despite the silent savagery with which she struggled, carried her out of the cabin.

Her head was over his shoulder, and she could see around her fairly well. She might have screamed, but for what good?

Half a dozen mounted men were waiting, and before she knew how it was done the man whose arms never relaxed was in the saddle of a led horse, and she was being borne away.

Yet, just as they started, there was the shadow of an interruption.

Some one started up behind them, and in the hastily seen figure she thought she recognized the rough-looking man who had accosted her a few hours before.

He was too far away for close shooting, and if he fired the revolver he threw up the chances were as good that he would hit her as the mad captain. At the sound of a report she shuddered and closed her eyes.

The bullet flew wide, however, and at once there were half a dozen answers. Honest Pete sunk to the ground, while the cavalcade swept on.

He was not hurt, however, for when they were beyond pistol range he rose again and shook his clinched fist after the outfit.

The course at first taken was directly to-

ward the mountains, and was followed some distance up the rising ground.

Then, they turned sharply to the left, following a dim bridle-trail, which proved to be smoother than it looked, though it seemed at length to end in the air. After that, the journey was made through a trackless waste, though the outlaws never were at a loss as to their course.

For some hours the rapid flight went on. Richard Avenel rode at the head with his captive, and not a word was said until the halt was called.

"Welcome to my home, child of my heart," was his salutation, when one of the men had relieved him of his burden.

"Here, under the greenwood tree we can renew the affection which has had its bands so sorely tried by time and separation. Lanius, show the princess to her apartment."

One of the men stepped forward, respectful in his bearing, but with a grin on his face.

"This way, ef yer please. An' don't try ter bust yer fathre's heart. We hev orders ter shoot ef yer tries ter run, an' we knows enough ter do ez we're told."

CHAPTER XX.

"MUSIC HAS CHARMS."

THE declaration of Bedrock was a surprise, and at first the sport scarcely credited it.

He had found the tramp shrewd enough after a fashion, and with plenty of nerve and brass, but he was yet to know him as he was, and he could not at once make up his mind that one man should be right, while the whole of Silverado was wrong.

And yet, when he had taken a few seconds to digest the announcement, he began to see it was not so unreasonable a statement.

Twice, during the course of the previous evening, had he seen Minnie Avenel vanish near the house, if indeed she did not enter it, so it was fair to believe she lived there or thereabout.

On the contrary, it seemed to surprise Silverado most of all that Dell Daly should have been there to be carried off.

He asked no questions, however.

Somehow, it seemed to him Bedrock was a man out of whom it was useless to try to extract more information than he desired to give. The best plan seemed to be to let him talk, and note the words of wisdom which fell from his tongue.

There was no question now about the rescue of Miss Daly. Warner was committed far more seriously to the interest of the other young lady; and if what Bedrock said was true, Dell might simply be sulking in her tent, over the result of the game at the Silver Seam.

For some distance Primrose walked, silent and thoughtful, though he stopped now and then to take a view of the lay of the land.

Probably he had been considering how far it would be good to confide in his companion, for without any preliminaries he began:

"Ett's bin strikin me thet Honest Pete ain't jest so honest arter all, an' ez he kinder give me ther shake I tho'rt I hed ther call ter 'vestigate him a bit, even ef we be sorter side pards."

"Arter you an' me suppured las' night I got sight ov him ag'in, nigh ter ther Silver Seam, an' I thunk he would bear watchin'; an' watched accordin'."

"True ez gospel, I found him a-crackin' ov a crib, which ther same war ther s'loon."

"He done it up nigh ter natural, han'led a jimmy ez though he war a fu'st class bu'glar, an' cleaned out Dell Daly's private desk s'lick ez a loon on a mill-pond."

"He kinder sorted things over, an' jest t'uk w'ot he wanted, an' then went on his way rejoicin', an' me a-follerin'."

"I hed ter keep well back er thar would 'a' bin a different story alloat in Silverado ter-day. He run up slap ag'in' ther outlaws ez they war a-kerryin' ther young lady away, and w'en they began shootin' hedn't sand ter stand up ter 'em, but played ther drop game."

"Then he ran 'round ter his cabin, me still on his trail. An' then, dog-gone it, I lost him. He jest melted away inter ther air, so ter speak, an' ef I hedn't 'a' tetched

his swag I'd 'a' thought I'd b'in euchered bad."

"You mean you got the plunder from the Silver Seam?" asked Dave, who was interested in the story, though it had little meaning for him.

"That's what. 'Peared ter be all papers ov no value to ary body but ther owner, but I salted 'em down in a safe cache, fur future refference, an' ef Miss Dell turns up ag'in they're waitin' fur her."

There was some further conversation about the matter, and then it began to be time to give closer attention to their course.

"Do you know anything about this country?" asked Warner, as he looked somewhat hopelessly around.

"I begin to suspect if I went much further alone they would have to send out a rescue party after me. It seems terribly lonesome to be so near the town."

"Know it like a book. Fact are, ett's a leetle hard ter pick out a strip ov land in a fair minin' kentry thet I don't know s'uthin' about. Kim West when I war young, yer see, an' grewed up with it. Wouldn't like ter sw'ar what we'll strike, but it'll be game ov some kind afore we're many hours older. I know all ther lurks an' ther lay-outs this side ov Halifax. Strikes me we're gittin' thar now. You listenin'?"

He stopped and held up his hand.

In the distance they heard the sounds of music.

"Seems to come from yander gulch, an' ett's not so fur outen our road thet we can't 'vestigate, though I'd advise we go mighty slow. Music hez charms ter soothe ther savage beast, onless it's ther beast w'ot plays it hisself. Then, it 'pears ter make him 'bout four times ez cantankerous. Better let me lead off a few yards, an' ef you see me drap you kin quietly mizzle."

As they advanced they could distinguish the sounds more clearly. Some one was playing on a violin with a masterly hand.

They were mistaken, though, if they hoped to come within sight of the musician without giving an opportunity for themselves to be seen.

The gorge rose abruptly, and on its bare side was perched a cabin.

"No use ter fool time erway a-creepin' an' a-crawlin' now. Ef he's goin' ter see us he's did it, an' ef we acts s'pishus like he may begin ter pump lead this way. Jest foller yer leader, an' we'll sail in fur a intervoo."

Bedrock had taken in the situation at once; but he had also detected the least little quaver in a couple of bars of the notes, and knew that the player must have seen them. If he was alone there was little danger so long as the music continued, and the two men quietly but by no means stealthily approached the cabin.

It was something of a climb, but they made their way there without much trouble, and halted in front of the open door.

The white-haired man who sat nigh the doorway, his eyes upturned in an ecstasy over the sweet sounds he was producing, might have been a hundred years old so far as appearance went, and as his visitors darkened the light he ceased playing and looked slowly up.

"Howdy, pard?" said Bedrock, with a jerk of his head. "Lived long about hyer?"

"I built this rude cabin, and you can see for yourself it was not done yesterday. Since then, few have visited me, and fewer yet have asked questions. What is it you want?"

"Drink ov water firstly. After that, ef thar's ary perticular claim 'round hyer ez you got a mor'gidge on jest p'int out ther stakes. Looks ez though it was a likely place ter strike et rich, an' me an' my pard thort ev lookin' over ther ground. An', mebbe, you wouldn't mind takin' a couple boarders till we see ef ett's wu'th while ter run up a shack. Ett m'ought be ez we've kim ter stay."

"Most likely not," responded the old man with a glance over the two, which would have made a less hardened sinner than Bedrock blush.

"Many prospectors have I seen at a distance, and they were better fixed for staying, yet they did not tarry long. Down yonder you can see traces of their spades, but I doubt if they carried away a color among them all. Yet, seeing is believing, and the gulch is all before you, where to choose."

He pointed toward the lower part of the gulch, a quarter of a mile away, where it did look as though there might be a chance for a find.

"Seen any ov 'em 'round ter-day?" queried Bedrock. "Thar's a hull gang ov us when we git tergether, an' mebbe some ov our pards hez kim this way."

"This day, save yourselves, living soul have I not seen. There lies the path to the spring. When you reach it, and have satisfied your thirst, best would it be for you to keep straight on over the mountain. For those who seek gold, better do the chances look on the other side."

"Thankee, uncle, an' p'rhaps we'll take advice. But afore we leave you I'd like ter ask wot sorter neighbors you got in these regions. Thar's a heap in that when one makes up his mind ter locate, an' ez you bin hyer so long yer order know 'em."

"No neighbors at all but the wolves and the snakes. If it is company you want go down to the city, where there are men of all kinds, even men like yourself. Best stay there and be happy."

"Prehaps, an' then ag'in, prehaps not. You think you could find two more ez could play ther old fiddle like you an' me? You bet not. We be ther grand old masters, an' when they want music with ther bark on they got ter come to us."

"You play?" asked the old man, extending instrument and bow toward Bedrock, while his fingers quaked with eagerness.

"I have been waiting so long for one to come who could."

"Sorter. Not like you, but good ernuf fur a or'nary crowd. How does this strike yer?"

He drew the bow over the strings once or twice, after the manner of the musician, and then wailed off into "Sounds from Home."

While he played he watched the eyes of the old man of the cabin, and was sure he saw a brace of tears glistening there.

"More," he said tersely, as Bedrock tendered him the violin again.

"Seems ter hit yer whar yer lives, an' ett's sca'ssly wuth while ter try yer with a'uthin' like this."

He rattled off the "Devil's Dream," and ran that into the "Fisher's Hornpipe." The bow wriggled, and slid, and leaped, and bounded. He had been the violin virtuoso before; now, he was the old-fashioned country fiddler. In either guise this all around man of wonderful talents was equally at home.

"Oh, say," said the old man, dropping the sober air which had seemed so well to suit him.

"I can't spare a man like you, all at once. There's something better than water in the closet, and I have another violin that is to this like a Cremona to the thing they get up for a dollar and a half to sell to boys. Stay with me a while and I'll treat you well, and if you don't want to, you'll stay anyhow. The boys have got you both covered. The first sign of a kick, and your partner drops; and I wouldn't even answer for you if you tried to crowd the funeral procession or make trouble among the mourners."

"I hedn't counted on makin' yer a visit," answered Bedrock coolly; "but I dunno ez I kin do better, an' that's a fact. You're a gent by ther name ov Vanredsecker, ef I'm not mistaken, an' after we git done fiddlin' I want to hev a leetle private talk, an' afore I git through mebbe it'll make yer hair curl."

"That is all right. You can talk to your heart's content, after you have earned the privilege. You did me a good turn down in town the other night, and I'm not likely to forget it, anyhow. But this pard of yours is so much dead wood. You're not very much attached to him, are you?"

There was something sinister in the look of the man as he asked the question that would have made some men shiver, but Dave Warner only smiled, while Rufe hastily interposed:

"I got him inter ther soup, an' you bet I'll stay with him. Tetch him, an' yer hits me."

"Well, tell him to uncock that derringer he has in his pocket and turn the muzzle some other way. Then he can go along with us, and take in the whole circus, with the side shows to boot."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN UGLY SITUATION.

At the first inkling he had of the fact that the man was not as old as he looked, Dave Warner dropped his hand into his coat-pocket and promptly covered him with the derringer he carried there.

At the same time he understood he in turn was covered by a lurker in the rear of the cabin—by several of them, in fact. He did not care to force the pace, but fancied he would have time after he saw the flash to crook his finger, and was sure he would not voyage the flume alone.

He listened to the conversation between Bedrock and the musician, understood he was in the hands of the mad outlaw, and at the invitation which was so frankly given, let the hammer of his gun down, withdrew his hand from his pocket, and was ready to follow, though he could not help remarking:

"If there was any reason why I should be worth my salt to any one hereabouts, I would say I had been very cleverly trapped, and would be paying my regards after a solid fashion to my pard there with the rope. But, as he might just as well have led me off some other way, it looks like a square accident, and I'm willing to make the best of it. I won't swear you won't get mighty tired before you get through with me, but that's your look-out. I can't fiddle, but I know how much to stack up when I hold a bob-tail flush; and it looks as though that was about the size of my hand just now."

"Don't make any threats or boasts, young man, and you may live a heap longer. I know you are a very uncomfortable man to go against, but maybe before we get through with one another we can play for each other's hands. You owe Colonel Randall one, and I want to see you paying off old scores before you come to your death."

Then he turned to Bedrock.

"May as well call me Avenel while you are my guest. That is the name I go by around here, and it's as good a one as any under the circumstances."

"All right, Richard. D'yer want ter blind-fold me, an' tie me han's behind me back?"

"Oh, no. Such precautions as those would be child's play. When you go out it will be all right for the future, and there will be no danger of your betraying us. If you can't go that way you won't go at all. I would hate to deprive the world of a man of your genius, but in this section of the country you have to look out for number one or you are apt to climb a tree, and take a rope along with you."

"Sincerely mourned by sorrerin' frien's. I sabbe."

The man of the cabin had not been prolonging the conversation without an object.

He did not intend to take too many risks, in spite of the careless way he seemed intending to treat his guests. His safety was to be looked after, and to arrange for that required a little time. A signal which he understood told him that all things were ready, and he delayed no longer. With his fiddle under his arm he left the cabin, followed by the two other guests.

The route they followed was intricate in its windings among boulder-studded ravines, but the mad outlaw carelessly preceded them through it all, more than once giving them a seeming chance to escape if they were so minded.

Whether there were men trailing on behind, to take a shot at their backs if they attempted it, never troubled Dave Warner, who followed his pard with a light footstep, and thorough unconcern as to what the upshot of all this was to be. He doubted if he could find his way over the trail again if left to his own devices, and Bedrock had no intention of going back for the present.

In course of time, and without too fatiguing a journey, they reached their destination, and halted at the very spot where the outlaw had alighted with Miss Avenel, the previous night.

"Here we are, at home at last. I trust there will be no interruptions, and we can give the day up to enjoyment. Don't be too inquisitive about what you don't see, and we will be as happy as three thieves with the run of the vaults of the Bank of California."

"Ef Kunnel Randall don't be bringin' his outfit along this way, sp'ilin' fur a fight. Ef

I war jest sure he'd keep outen ther way I could feel real happy."

"Don't be alarmed about him, old man. He has a kennel in this direction himself, and there are too many square men along with him. He'll see they don't get too near to his own burrow. And as he don't suspect what is going on so near to him, there is no good reason why he shouldn't."

"Kinder think it meself. Ez fur ez bizziness goes ett looks like a pity you an' ther kunnel cain't play yer han's more tergether like, an' make a fair divvy at ther end of ther game. An' yit, noboddy ez knew him, 'less he war a blamed loonytick, would trust him."

"You are right, my friend; and I am only crazy. Give me your hand again. For words of wisdom you beat the chief of philosophers. And now, to business. Make yourself at home here. Will be back in a minute."

He hurried away, but soon returned, bringing another instrument; and for the next hour the two were apparently oblivious of all the rest of the world. They played together, and they played alone. Sometimes, one was second, and sometimes the other. To have seen them, as Dave Warner did, one would have thought they were the greatest friends in the world.

"You have the rudiments," said the outlaw, when they had gone over a pile of music together: "but you are woefully out of practice. When you have been here a year or so we'll change all that. It is time to be thinking of dinner, now; and after that I will have to leave you for a while. When one is in my profession he has to be up and doing if he wants to make both ends meet."

"All right. Don't let me interfere. But ef you kin spare me time shortly fur a consultashun it'll be doin' ov me a favor, an' I'll know better ef it are goin' ter pay, foolin' me preshus hours away with a 'scaped crack-brain thet seems ter be on aware wich side his bread's buttered on."

"In time, in time. Don't spur a willing horse and you will get to the end of your journey all the sooner. Business first and pleasure afterward."

The mountain air and the exercise they had taken had given the two men a good appetite, which was not affected even by the strange uncertainties of their position. They did ample justice to the meal; and afterward, when they were invited to retire for safe keeping, followed Avenel to something which looked very like a dungeon without a word.

"We are here," said Warner, as they looked at one another when left alone.

"I'm not able to see how the position is going to turn out a profitable one, and for my part, it will not be long before I try to change it."

"Might be wu'ss fur you, pard, an' ett's all right fur me. Ther thing war a kinder ov a surprise, but I'm makin' ther best outen it. We got ther inside track on ther kunnel, an' ef yer gives me time ernuf we'll bring ladybird back ter town with flyin' colors. Don't sp'ile a horn onless ye'r sure you kin make a spoon."

"But, see here, I want to get out of this."

"Yer cain't git out, so w'ot's ther use? Rest easy an' Bedrock'll bring yer through all right. He's goin' fur a snooze jest now—not knowin' how soon he'll hev a chance ag'in, an' you better do likewise."

"Sleep, then," said Dave sulkily, as Primrose threw himself down on a pallet which occupied one corner of the cell.

"Xpecter," retorted Bedrock, and in five minutes he was snoring.

When he awoke, an hour or so later, he found he was alone in the cell. In some mysterious way Dave Warner had disappeared.

But at the same time he heard a slight noise at the doorway and looking hastily thitherward saw the mad outlaw, a pistol in either hand that never wavered, and both muzzles trained straight for the heart of Ragged Rufe.

CHAPTER XXII.

DAVE WARNER'S FATE FINDS HIM.

THE lady who desired to be known by the name of Minnie Avenel could certainly be as cool as the coolest.

Once arriving at the retreat and she accepted her fate without a word, though she turned up her nose in silent scorn at the outlaw who was told off as her guard.

It might have been supposed she was chilly from the night air, and in the outer room of the cave into which she was led, there burned a cheerful fire, by the side of which she was allowed to take a seat. The man on watch sat on the other side, his gun between his knees, and she knew that from time to time he eyed her sharply, though their glances never met.

The mad captain remained behind, and it was a bitter pill for her when she learned the reason. The gang was assembled just outside, and she could hear his words quite plainly.

"Nothing like quick accounts to make long friends," he was saying.

"The proceeds of the evening seem to have amounted to about five thousand, which is a very pretty little sum for a few hours' work, with little risk. I'll put my fifth in my pocket, and you can divide the rest of it so that each man gets his share—and you want to look out for those who are not here, or there will be trouble in the camp. Remember, all, that our visitor is to be treated with the greatest respect as long as she behaves herself. But she is not to get away. Kill her first. I think she understands the situation already, and if she does not, she will after the interview I will hold with her. Now, those who are for duty relieve the guards, and see you keep a bright look for pursuit. It is not likely there will be any trouble, but the unexpected sometimes happens."

He waved them away, and entered the cave in search of his fair young prisoner.

"So this is really Dick Avenel's daughter—poor Dick, who ought to have been heir to at least half of the Vanredsecker million. It does me good to see you; especially since I have found out what a brave, honest little woman you can be."

"I am glad to hear you say so," responded the young lady, ignoring the fact that it was hard to tell whether the outlaw spoke from the heart, or only from the lips; whether he meant what he said, or only intended to be sarcastic.

"You and I, and a few more know who Dick Avenel is, and that this is not the sort of life he should be living. What madness possesses you I know not, but surely there is a way out, and back, to home and friends, and happiness."

"And the Vanredsecker million, as shared by you," laughed the outlaw, darting a keen look at the girl.

"A million can account for a good deal of affection on the part of a child. I recognized that fact when you spoke to me at the Silver Seam, though I am not aware of any reason why you should make such a public display of it. Under the circumstances, most children would have declined to recognize a parent, especially when the recognition might cost him his life. Perhaps that was what it was intended for. A little weeping afterward would have set you all right with the world, and it would be more satisfactory all around if Dick Avenel was out of the way."

"How can you hint at such a thing?" exclaimed the young lady, with every appearance of indignation.

"Had you taken my warning at the instant it was given I might have been able to lead you to a safe retreat, where there would have been time and opportunity to devise some means of escape."

"As engineered by my dear friend, Colonel Randall. Thanks, but I don't know that I wish to escape. Life here goes on like a summer's day-dream and the more I see of it the more I love it. And profitable? Think of gathering in five thousand by as it were the turn of a hand."

"Stolen from your own daughter!" exclaimed the girl, bitterly.

"Ah, indeed. What evidence have you of that?"

"The money you speak of was in my hands, and has since passed through yours; what more evidence should I want?"

"Oh, I don't mean about the money. I could give my daughter that much for pin-money every day in the year and not miss it. I refer to the sacred title of, 'my daughter.'"

"Your own heart ought to tell you that."

"Ha, ha! Why, girl, what has a lunatic to do with hearts, and natural affection? In course of time, now, something of the kind may develop. Till it does you can consider yourself a prisoner, and your treatment will depend considerably on how long my moments of sanity last and what shape my next spell of lunacy may take. When I am in one of my mad moods I would just as soon hang my daughter as any one else."

"You cannot frighten me by your idle threats. I know that somewhere about you there is a heart, and sooner or later I will find it, and bring you to know the truth as it is. Keep me here a captive, if you choose, with the threat of sudden death hanging over my head. It shall not harm me, and for not very long will it please you. I know you have had a wild, strange life, with which I have unfortunately had little to do, but it is not too late to change all that, and when you understand, now that I have found you, how thoroughly I propose to devote myself to your safety and happiness, you will blush at this night's madness, and decide never to be a lunatic again."

She looked across at him firmly, and boldly. If ever sweet lips told the brave truth hers seemed to be speaking it now.

Avenel returned her gaze with interest.

"If ever there was a born actress you are one," he said after a momentary silence.

"The courage it must take for you to keep up the farce with no eye to note it, or hands to applaud, makes me almost think you can be the daughter of Dick Avenel, and no one else. It is a dangerous game you have undertaken to play, and before you are through with it you will be sure it is a profitless one. Enough of this for to-night. When you want to make a full confession let me know."

"Confession! What have I to confess?"

"Ask Colonel Randall?" was his rejoinder as he left the cave.

After a little the guard spoke.

"When yer gits tired toastin' yerself, an' wants ter slumber, you'll find yer bed made in thar. Thar's a bolt on yer door, an' I'd 'dvice yer ter shoot it. Ther captain are in one ov his maddest ways ter-night, an' I re'ely don't think he's safe."

She went away without word of answer, but did not neglect his advice, for she closed the door behind her, and shot the great bolt to its place before examining the apartment into which she had entered.

There was a lamp burning faintly, and she could just see that it was more comfortably furnished than she could have expected, while the bed was by no means uninviting to one in her tired condition. She tested its softness, and, with a sigh of satisfaction, fell asleep.

A knock at the door aroused her some hours later, and she found that a breakfast had been provided for her, which was substantial and appetizing. Under the green-wood tree she might have enjoyed it with greater zest than in this cell, but she did full justice to it, after all, and there were not many remnants to send away.

After that, there were no more interruptions for the time being, and she spent an hour or so considering the situation, and examining her new quarters.

There did not seem much necessity for her remaining shut up there, for there were two doors to the room, and both of them unfastened on the outer side.

She did not care to venture out, however, since she knew there was a guard still on duty, but she left the door slightly ajar, so as to keep up communication with the outer world.

In this way she became aware of the arrival of the visitors whom the mad outlaw brought to his den, and heard the voice of at least one that seemed familiar. It was scarcely possible to forget Bedrock's tones when once they had been heard.

In regard to the other she was not so certain, but guessed rather than understood it was the man who had escorted her into the Silver Seam when she was bent on giving the warning to Dick Avenel.

Afterward she heard the muffled sound of voices behind the door which in spite of feminine curiosity she had not yet opened, and afterward heard the outlaw depart. It seemed to her that here might be a chance

for succor, and with finger on lip she at length opened the door.

Bedrock was sound asleep, but Dave Warner was reclining carelessly, in what she judged was a brown study, since he gave no sign of having heard the slight noise she had made.

"Hist!" she whispered.

"I judge you are in as great danger as myself; perhaps we can help each other."

Warner looked up hastily, and saw the woman he had come out to rescue was before him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WORSE RUFFIANS THAN THE OTHERS.

WARNER had been biding his time.

He was on the ground, and in what he said to Bedrock had felt somewhat jubilant over the fact that at least he had reached the lair of the mad captain.

Yet, before doing anything desperate, he felt it might be as well to know whether the young lady really desired to be rescued.

After the scene in the saloon he could not feel certain she was not a willing prisoner.

Her appearance now, and the words she said, settled all that. Without a sound he was on his feet, leaning eagerly forward.

"Think nothing of me, but altogether of yourself. How can I aid you?"

"It looks as though I ought to ask the question. If a madman can be influenced at all, I should be able to take care of myself, and perhaps a friend. And yet, when he is in his worst state, such as I have lately seen him in, I fear for us both. Our better hope is to escape from this, and I can seek him again when his mood has changed."

"Better, perhaps, but slender, without more risk for you than I ought to urge you to take. If it be really so that you are in the hands of your father, it seems as though our quest was thrown away. Surely, with him you are safe."

"When he is in his right mind, yes. But there are times when he doubts the world, and his only instinct is to slay. It is the dread of having at some time to protect myself that forces me away."

"I understand; and it is because I do not dare to kill the man that I am so uncertain what would be for the best. There are not half a dozen men, probably, in the gang, and if my partner there, is as good as I suspect, we could get away with them. But in so doing, it might be death for Dick Avenel; and for that I know you would never forgive me."

"No, no!" exclaimed the girl, with a shiver. "Whatever else happens I can not cause his death. We must escape by stealth. Perhaps there is another outlet to this place. Your room has two doors, as has mine. Let us see what lies beyond. My lamp will last for hours yet, and even darkness would not be worse than to remain here."

She spoke as though she meant it, in spite of the nerve she had shown before the captain.

That, however, was when she had no one but herself to rely on. Now, she felt that Dave Warner was a man whom she could trust to the death, if need be, and was willing to put her case in his hands.

"It looks like desertion," he said, looking thoughtfully at Bedrock.

"Yet, till I know better what is his game, I am not sure he would be of any great aid, in our efforts, or in any great danger if left behind. What shall I do?"

"Leave him. I trust him not, though no man seems better able to take care of himself. Let him sleep the sleep of the unrighteous, while we get away from this hateful spot."

Warner hesitated, but the eye of Minnie Avenel was on him; and that meant more for him than he yet knew. He had not known her long, nor had he seen much of her, yet she was nearer to his heart already than he dreamed.

"As you say," he answered, a trifle gloomily, and with noiseless footsteps followed his fair adviser.

The cave which the mad outlaw occupied as his headquarters was of considerable extent, though by no means a labyrinth.

It was only the outer portion which had been fixed up after a rude fashion for occupancy, and its inner depths were seldom if

ever visited by the gang which trained under their singular leader.

One other room did the two find, and after that they were in a narrow, gloomy passage, which might lead straight on into the bowels of the mountain. But Minnie Avenel did not hesitate.

"It does not look as though we were to find any outlet here, but we will be none the worse off through knowing the truth."

"And if we are lost in the passages?" queried Warner, more for the purpose of finding out if she understood the perils of the place than to shake her nerve.

"Then Richard Avenel will hunt us out and take us back. Perhaps by that time his madness will be gone again, and though he might forget us, the fellow you left behind, and his own men, would remind him that we must have gone this way."

"True enough, but it is to be hoped we will not need his aid, or linger here till he finds us. I will go in front."

He took the lamp from her hand and advanced with caution. There was danger of stepping into pitfalls, or passing side avenues which might confuse them, if they were compelled to retrace their steps.

Rough and unpleasant to follow, their path certainly was, but they met with no obstacle to bar their progress, having apparently taken the true course from first to last. Before they had time to grow discouraged, they caught sight of a faint glimmer of light ahead.

"Ah," said Warner, as he pointed it out. "Is that the blessed sunlight, or have we come back in our tracks to the starting-place? We must advance with caution till we find out."

He lowered the flame in the lamp, and stepped more lightly than ever, while Minnie Avenel's footsteps made no echo.

"Daylight it is," he added, a little later, when he could trace the outlines of a jagged rent in the rock.

"The first step in the game is ours."

They advanced with more care than ever, both because there was no telling what might lie on the other side of that opening, and because the road before them was more difficult than ever.

Indeed, it seemed as though it was but a fortunate chance they had caught sight of the spot when they did, for after a step or two more it vanished from view. If Dave had not so well noted its location, it might have been hard to find it again.

He knew where it must be, and kept the point in his mind, aiming steadily for it, in spite of the turnings and twistings which the roughness of the way compelled them to take. The passage widened out into a room of considerable extent, and it was not so easy to retain the direction, and at the same time avoid stumbling over the obstacles which arose in their path.

"Right about there it must be," said the sport, at length, pointing upward.

"But no streak of daylight can I see. It looks like a solid wall of rock. What I know I know, or I would say I had missed it altogether. But, I can see no signs of it anywhere else."

He looked keenly around in spite of the certainty he had expressed. There might be some other outlet, more easy to find and to reach.

The girl had a wiser head than Warner had thought. She was not frightened, and she had an explanation ready which he had not remembered.

"Perhaps there is no more daylight to shine through. Unless I am mistaken it is time for the sun to be down, and we may have caught a glimpse of his setting rays. If you are sure that is the spot, attack it. I will remain just as I am so that we will not altogether lose our bearings in case you fail."

"That's a fact, and I ought to have thought of it. We will find the way out yet."

The way upward presented no great obstacle. There were holds for hands and feet, and Dave, as he spoke, moved forward and attacked the side of the cavern.

"Set the lamp down where you stand, and come on," he called out, a moment later, in something like boyish glee.

"I have had a glimpse of the stars, and we find our way out here or nowhere. I

will help you upward when you come to the rock."

"I need no help," she answered back lightly; and before he well knew she was moving she stood beside him.

The entrance here was well masked. From without nothing could have been seen but a huge boulder, clinging to the mountain-side, a dozen feet or more from the gorge below. The opening led up to the top of this boulder, and was so low the two had to creep the latter part of their journey.

The moon had not yet risen, but by the light of the stars they looked down upon the valley, which for the most part appeared grim and forbidding.

In the distance, however, twinkled a faint light which immediately caught their attention.

"I am afraid I am not the best of mountain-men," laughed Dave.

"For all I know, yonder light may come from Silverado; but more likely it is from the camp of the outlaws. I fail to recognize a single landmark, and can think of nothing better than to follow the lay of the land downward, and trust to run the gantlet if we strike Dick Avenel's sentries. It will never do to remain. How shall it be?"

"Better approach that light cautiously. I imagine the camp of the outlaws is not on this gulch, at all. We may find some honest prospector who will guide us out of this, and start us on the road to Silverado by a route which will have but little danger along its trail."

The advice was worth taking, perhaps; and anyhow, it was the opinion of Minnie Avenel, which began to go a great ways with the sport. He followed it without another word. The light was not by any means as far off as it had seemed, and before they had gone a quarter of a mile they knew it was scarce a stone's throw away. It came from an opening in the side of a rude cabin, and out in the open air two men, with heads bent close together, were discussing a question of life and death to some one within.

"Reckon ther boss hev got inter deep water, er he'd bin hyer afore now," growled one voice, which Warner recognized at once.

"An' thar's on'y one thing fur us ter do ter save trouble," answered another, which was also familiar.

"Put her ter sleep fur good, an' move on ter ther next camp. Lucky we got our pay in advance—which come ov ther boss knowin' ez we war men he could trust."

In the two plotters Warner recognized the men who had thrown him into the dump-hole, the evening he approached Silverado.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"THE BOSS" ARRIVES, JUST TOO LATE.

WHAT were these men planning to do? Was it Minnie Avenel they were going to put to sleep for good; and were they not aware of her escape?

Warner wished he had made Minnie keep in the background. He did not care to have her hear her death spoken of so coolly by the wretches. They were hardly fit to live; and he raised his revolver with an almost involuntary motion.

A light touch on his arm restrained him. He had an account to settle with these men, anyhow; but that could wait so long as it was better for the sake of the woman he was to guide and protect.

Bandy had been considering the situation during a momentary silence. It was worth while to remain silent a little longer and hear what he had to say.

"That's all right, pard, ef yer kin muster up ther pluck ter do it; but ef you can't, who are ter work ther racket?"

"All both ov us," was the prompt reply.

"I ain't a'xin' er givin' sich advantages. We'll both be in ther mix up to ther elbow, an' then we'll be fur gittin' out. Ef ther boss hed been able ter switch Silverado off ther track he'd a' bin hyer afore now. An' ef he couldn't it won't be long afore ther hull city'll be onto us. I'll bet they're camped right on ther trail, now."

"Come on, then, ef ye'r man ernuf, an' we'll git ther blasted business over. I've done things I liked better in my time, but

ther trouble are, ther cussed heifer knows us both."

They arose together, and stole toward the cabin, followed by the unsuspected listeners.

"Sorry ter say, miss, ez yer frien's ain't made ary show-up yet, an' we be tired lookin' fur 'em. I don't see ary way fur us out ov ther mix onless we throw off ther boss ter save our own necks. An' ez he may be livin' yit that might not be so healthy arter all. We jest got ter go through ther hull programme—which ends at ther flume. No use fur you ter yelp, but we don't 'bjeet ter a leetle quiet prayin' ef yer thinks et'll do yer ary good hyerafter. We'll call on yer in 'bout a minnit, an' you better hev yer soul all ready."

There never were such unadulteratedly villainous men as these, thought Dave, as he listened to Bandy's speech.

He had never shot down a man in cold blood, but he began to think he had an excuse here, and that it would be wise to run no risks.

His own life he was not so particular about, but the lives of two women depended on him, and until they were safe he was going to try and take very good care of himself.

Still, the warning touch on his arm restrained him. Minnie Avenel was bound to be certain of what sort of ending they intended to all this, and up to the utmost limit of safety Dave would hardly balk her.

Her hand dropped along his arm until it rested upon his revolver.

He thought he understood the warning pressure she then gave.

He had best endeavor to settle it all without an appeal to fire-arms. The report might summon Dick Avenel to a scene where he was not wanted.

"True enough," he thought.

"If I can't get the fellows in shape to knock them both out without a chance for noise I will appeal to the magic of the drop. But, after that—they must not get away."

The two were arranging a rope, a noose being made near the middle of it so that each might hold an end. When that was fixed to their liking they turned to the door of the cabin again.

Bandy tried it—and then uttered an oath of disgust.

"Be durned ef she ain't got her han's loose, an' are gittin' ready fur a pic-nic. That's some ov your tyin', pard. Ef she bez ther bar down thar will be trouble ter git in."

"Ef we can't git in what's ther matier with stayin' out? Sot fire to ther blamed old shack, an' let 'er went, all, everything ter-gether."

"An hev all Silverado strikin' fur ther blaze. Fire be durned."

"You got Silverado on ther brain. I don't b'lieve they be half so sot on findin' out what's become ov ladybird ez you seem ter think. She's talkin' now, let's hear what she says."

A woman's voice arose from behind the door, and in its clearly-cut tones Warner recognized it as belonging to Dell Daly.

"You men out there, I give you fair warnin'! I am not throwing any lead away shootin' at shadows in the dark, but I have six lives here, and you have only two to take. Attempt to pass this threshold to-night and I begin to shoot. If you are not gone by morning I'll drop you both. You know how Dell Daly shoots, and as soon as I can see I'll have you lined."

Bob clapped his hand to his side, with a sudden remembrance.

"B'thunder, she's got my spar' shootin'-iron, an' every chamber's loaded!"

Warner thought he saw the chance he had been waiting for, and with arm drawn back so that his fist nearly touched his shoulder he gave a step.

"Wait!" whispered a voice at his side, which he thought unnecessarily loud, even before he noted the result.

The two men turned to face in his direction, dropping the rope, and whipping out their revolvers, while at the same time a pair of steel-like arms were thrown around him from behind, and in the midst of his surprise he was borne to the ground.

He was cool enough to detect the little, alarmed cry which arose from the lips of Minnie, and the rustle of her running feet as she fled from the spot.

After that, for him, for some time, life was a blank.

The new-comer had managed to strike the sport a terrific blow, with the iron-bound butt of a clubbed revolver, which laid him senseless, and apparently dead, at the feet of the victor, who coolly turned the weapon in his hand and cocked it before he exclaimed:

"Now then, you men, tell us what all this is about. Here is a spy in the camp, and I've got him; but what's the matter in there?"

"It's ther boss!" exclaimed Bandy, though he was in no haste to come forward.

"You are right, it is the boss; and he will be lording it over some dead meat soon if you don't spit it out, straight as a string. What is the matter in there?"

He pointed toward the cabin, but there was no difficulty in understanding his meaning. Bandy spoke out, though not very boldly.

"That's ther way I allers give it to yer. Ther shemale woman in thar hez simply got ther bulge on us, an' are tryin' ter use it so ez ter do her ther most good. Who that are I are not able fur to say, ez it's ther fu'st I heard ov him. Are he dead?"

"That depends on how thick his skull is. If he's an ordinary man, I guess he is, but tie him up and pitch him aside for the present. If he comes to, I'll have to say something to him. Just now, we have the lady in the cabin to attend to, and if you have let her get the bulge, as you say, she won't be so easy to handle. What were you fellows going to do about it?"

"Wait ter see ef you war comin', an' ef yer didn't show up afore mornin', set fire ter ther shack an' pull foot."

"May have to follow the plan yet. This fellow isn't as dead as he looked for. Perhaps we can make use of him. Keep an eye on the shanty, that she don't give us the slip—"

"By ther 'tarnal, thar she goes now!"

The three had been so busy bending over the sport, while they tied him hand and foot, that they had forgotten the woman in the cabin. Bob had only happened to get a glimpse of what looked like a dark shadow, and gave the alarm for what it was worth.

The boss did not hesitate.

Almost before the words left the fellow's mouth he had a revolver up and pointed, though the shadow vanished as he pulled the trigger.

A cry from the lips of a woman followed the report, and then all was silent.

"You needn't look for her," said the boss, coolly, as he replaced his smoking weapon.

"Sorry I had to do it myself, but perhaps it is just as well. When I pick trigger, I generally know where my lead is going to. Another sin to score to the account of the mad outlaw—if the corpse is ever found. The next thing is to try and find out if this fellow was alone, and who he is."

"Come ag'in, sure ez you live. Seems ez though he's bound ter be round. Ett's ther coon we throwed inter ther hole."

Bandy it was who made the discovery, and his voice was the first thing Warner heard as consciousness began to return.

"I believe, on my soul, that it is," exclaimed the boss.

"It was bad form to let him get away then, and it would be something I could hardly pardon now; and yet, who is the fellow, and what is he after? This is hardly chance, and we will save him up till we see what he knows. Better hunt up that corpse after all, and put it where it won't be found. It's just as well if she never is heard from again."

They looked carefully over the spot the cry had seemed to come from, but unfortunately for the reputation of the boss, no body was there to be found. Dell Daly had escaped altogether, and there was not even a trail of blood-drops to show the way she had gone.

CHAPTER XXV.

A MAD TEST.

"YER needn't ter shoot, pard, I'll kim down," said Bedrock, cool as a cucumber, fully realizing at a glance that the drop was on him.

"Tain't off'n I'm ketched a-nappin', but when I are I'm willin' ter make ther wu'st ov it an' take w'ot follers."

Primrose had the utmost confidence in the insanity of the outlaw, and therefore was totally unprepared to guess what would be his next move.

He was pretty sure, though, that if he made an offensive motion of any kind he was elected to pass over the range, and that it was more than even money he was going to take the journey anyhow.

For a moment Avenel regarded him sternly.

"Where is the other man?" he asked at length; "and what have you two done with the girl?"

"Bless yer soul! I ain't a-keepin' ov ther other man; that's your job. An' hope may die ef I've see'd ary girl at all. Don't yer think, pard, yer mind be a-wanderin', jest a leetle?"

"If it is, so much the worse for you. In my sane moments I can be as gentle as a cooing dove; but when the blood gets into my brain I am a demon. I trusted you, here, in my sanctuary, and you have betrayed that trust. You have allowed your friend to rush to his own destruction, and take with him one whom I was holding as a hostage to fortune. It may well cost me millions. For such treachery there can be but one punishment—death."

"Sorry ter hear yer say so, pard; more on your account than mine. I jedge you hev a tender cons'huns, an' in after days it'll fill yer soul with unskwinchable regret ef yer allows yerself ter p'fforate ther great, ther unapproachable, ther king-pin ov pheelosophers."

"You are a cool hand, but your coolness will avail you nothing. It will, perhaps, be the best ending for a worthless, misspent life. Remember, I continue to hold the drop. Remain as you are."

He whistled shrilly, and two or three of his men entered.

"Draw the fellow's teeth," was the sharp order.

The men advanced, but were careful to leave the range unobstructed. A twist of the finger would still mean death for the man with the rope.

"Take him out and tie him to the tree," was the next order, as Avenel carelessly returned his pistols to his belt.

"I will consider his case for a few moments, and decide what is to be done."

Bedrock was treated with no unnecessary roughness, since he showed a willingness to obey orders. He was marched out of the cave in solemn silence, and trussed up with neatness and dispatch. Then the men fell back a few paces, and stood on guard.

He had not long to wait. Soon the captain appeared, his face stern-set.

He turned to one of the outlaws, who seemed to be an inferior officer.

"Detail six men for an execution. Finish him up at thirty yards, and if you do not find six marks on the body, report to me. There will be an investigation."

"You say," was the answer, and Avenel went back into the tavern.

Mad though the outlaw might be, he understood how to preserve discipline. His orders were obeyed with a promptness that would have been refreshing to a mariner, but which offered little consolation to Ragged Rufe.

Before he had fairly time to digest the situation, the file of men stepped out with military precision, and were halted at about thirty yards away.

"Ready!" said the officer in charge.

Half a dozen Winchester barrels fell into as many hands, with a single spat.

"Aim!"

The muzzles covered Bedrock with a steadiness that he could not help but note, as he gazed on the file of executioners.

"Fire!"

The rifles blazed together, there was a thunderous roar, and Bedrock, feeling a hurricane of thuds against his body, allowed his eyes to close and his head to drop forward. He had only one feeling, and that was astonishment that he had not already lost consciousness.

"Right about march!" came the order, and the file of men went back into the cave, leaving the motionless body hanging there.

As they disappeared, Avenel came striding out, and approached the victim.

"Alive or dead, old man? Fix it to suit

yourself, and whichever it is I'll take your word for it."

"Alive, yer l'udship, an' likely ter last fur a thousand years yit. Ef that part ov ther game are over, cut me down an' gi'm-me a drink. "Ett's not much ter look at, but it's terryble wearin' on ther nerves."

"Nerves! You have no nerves," was the retort of the outlaw, as he applied his knife to the ropes.

"I have heard of you before, and when I had the chance, wanted to see what you were made of. Don't know much more now than I did before. Must be all steel and aluminum. So, you never beg?"

"Never, unless ther state ov ther game makes it a injuicement ter try an' force ther ether feller ter run ther keyards. Ez you hev hed yer fun, I s'pose thar's nothin' more fur me ter do but ter pull foot fur some other climate. Yer s'kassy wants ter git more fun outen old Bedrock."

"Don't take it too hard, old man, and I'll try to make it up to you. A person with such a cast steel nerve can't be either a spy or a traitor, and if you will give me your word not to work more damage than you can help, and give no office to any one else, you might do worse than stay with me till we get better acquainted."

"Thankee, pard, but ef you thinks I don't know yer a'ready, you got less sense, even, than I give yer credit fur. A sweet gang you Vanredseckers be, an' I b'gins ter believe ther young lady ez are missin' cain't be anybody but a daughter ov yourn. An' tha's what I want ter find out."

"My unchristian friend, that is exactly what I would like to know myself. Let us join hands in solving the mystery. I think she is a fraud. But one can't always tell."

"But I know it," added Primrose, enthusiastically.

"An' I'm willin' ter bet 'bout three thousand ter one thet I hev ther simon-pure, on-adulterated article in-me mind's eye at ther present talkin'. Ef I could only prove jest how she got her proofs, I'd be willin' ter swar it."

"What! Minnie alive, without a doubt!"

"Jest that same. That's w'ot I'm hyer fur—an' at Silverado. Come post-haste ter sift out ther truth, an' pervent scoundrelosity. But I warn't countin' on hittin' you. It kinder flung me abroad. An' I dunno ez I've got ary great use fur you now. You sure you on'y got one woman onder ther shadder ov yer wing?"

"One only, who claims to be Minnie Avenel—which means, Minnie Vanredsecker. If you have anything to tell me, waste no time. I'm not near as mad as they make me out—only a sort of exaggerated crank. And I think if it be true that my daughter lives, and it is possible to find her out, that I might be reformed altogether."

"Which means, you'd be willin' ter give up ther profits ov a successful season ez a road-agent fur ther sake ov holpin' a lady enjoy a hull million in bulk."

"Perish the million! It may be the horrors of that night did, after a fashion, turn my brain, but it was never because I yearned for more than my share of the old man's wealth. It was the murder in it, and the horror of that murder, which drove me wild. So far, save in self-defense, I have never taken a human life, but there is one life I would have taken long ago if I could have been certain of the truth. It is forfeit to justice half a dozen times over, for other crimes, but let justice go hang. When the time comes I will be my own avenger."

There could be no mistaking the earnestness with which he spoke, and Bedrock grew sober himself. He seldom cared to alter his plans on the spur of the moment; and it had not been his idea to take Richard Avenel fully into his confidence, until he saw other matters a great deal clearer.

"It is this way, boss," he began, at length; and then stopped.

He heard a rifle-shot, and an instant after the replying rattle of half a dozen more. And then, on the air of the evening which was fast closing in, there arose a chorus of shouts, and the noise of more firing. A lively little fight was going on at no great distance.

"Excuse me, Richard, but I reckon ther time fer confidences hev not arrove; an' ef you kin show me ther way ter ther back

door, I'd reely like ter retire. I cain't fight you, an' I wouldn't like ter hev ther men ov Silverado see me doing anything else."

"Go into the cave then!" hastily exclaimed the outlaw.

"You will be safe there, and I will hunt you up after the flurry is over."

He gave Bedrock a push in one direction, and bounded away himself in another. The sounds of a fight already seemed to be coming nearer, and he was anxious to have a hand in the affray.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DAVE WARNER'S DANGER.

"RECKON I'm left to me own devices," thought Bedrock, as he sauntered into the cave.

"I'd dearly love ter see ther scrimmage, but ez it are by no means sure w'ich side 'll kim out jaybird, noncombattants hed better not git too fur to ther front; an' fur nex' best fun I kin spend ther spar' moments lookin' fur me missin' pard. I got er sorter go-ey-er-choose commisshun, an' it ain't likely thar will be arybody examinin' it very soon ef Silverado sand an' outlaw bravery keeps to ther scratch ez clost ez I think they will. Hyer goes."

With a light in his hand he first looked around until he found his belt of weapons, where it had been thrown carelessly down when he was disarmed.

Then, he wandered on, following the same path pursued by Warner and the missing young lady.

Straight on he went until he came near to the end; and then, for a little, was at fault. He found the lamp where they had left it on the ground, but no trace of anything beyond, though it made him certain he was on the right trail.

Backward and forward he went, examining the wall of rock for a hidden door, or a concealed opening, and it was only by chance, at last, he tried the wall, at a spot where he thought he could climb upward.

This brought him, at last, to the opening, and after that the way out to the open air was clear enough.

He lingered at the mouth, peering down over the edge of the bowlder, and listening to see if he was mistaken when he thought he could catch the faint sound of muttering voices.

He could hear nothing of the fight he had left behind him, but there had been plenty of time for that to be over, while it was possible the lay of the land was such the din of the battle could not reach him in any event.

While he hesitated, some one came running toward the spot with light footsteps, and he dodged back into the low passage. He thought he recognized in the fugitive a woman, but could not be sure, until she had clambered up on the great rock, and crouched there, panting.

A little later there was the report of a revolver, and a suppressed scream.

Bedrock began to guess at the situation; and was not as far off from the truth as might have been supposed.

"This hyer are one woman, an' out yander are t'other, but w'ich are w'ich I cain't say tell I git a leetle closter."

"Ez my pard seems ter hev hit a blue streak ov luck it are fa'r ter b'lieve thet they've downed him among 'em, though, with Bedrock in ther bushes, ett's safe ter say he'll kim out safe in ther long run. I 'spect this hyer be Avenel's darling, an' that would make it Dell Daly w'ot war a-waltzin' off. Now, w'o's ther shooter? Kin I draw a bead on him ef thar's a chainece, er must I trust ter quick fingers an' ther gift ov gab? Best plan are ter 'vestigate this hyer critter, an' find out w'ot she's bin a-doin'."

The "critter" was the fugitive Minnie, and she was crouched within the length of an arm of Primrose. There was no trouble about capturing her, but he was uncertain whether he could do it without raising an alarm.

He knew a bluff would not win with Dell Daly, but this was probably the other young lady, and he had not as high an opinion of her courage.

"Not a word, er you die," he said solemnly, at the same time cocking a revolver and

thrusting it forward until the cold muzzle touched the back of Minnie Avenel's neck.

"I'm yer frien' tell death, but I don't want yer ter give me away."

He felt a faint quiver run through the frame of the woman against whom his revolver rested.

She understood the situation; and was cool enough to make the best of it. That was better luck than he had hoped for.

"Might hev knowed it," he continued, in the same guarded whisper.

"On'y wanted ter give yer time ter think a bit. Now we kin git at ther bottom fack's 'thout much trouble. Ez you may know, I'm ole Bedrock, an' ther side pard of Dave Warren for ther present emergency. You an' him skipped tergether, but he seems ter hev turned up missin'. Now, w'ot's goin' on down thar. Give us ther hull story, but b'ile it down inter short meter, fur mebbe I'll hev ter be up an' doin'."

Very briefly did Minnie explain their flight, and what had taken place in the gulch beyond. When Dave went down before the unexpected attack she had fled back to the cave, and was waiting at the opening to try and learn what was going to happen next.

She would rather take her chances with the mad outlaw, than with ruffians such as those who had been threatening the life of the prisoner of the cabin. Who she might be she did not profess to know, or even suspect.

"Yer cain't well go back ter headquarters, ez, when I left, thar war every symptom ov a lively time approachin'. An' I d'unno ez I keer ter trust yer lyin' round hyer ter complerate ther case. Ain't sure but w'ot ther best plan would be ter trice yer uphan' an' foot, with a muzzle on, tell I git things a leetle better arranged."

Bedrock spoke reflectively, and fingered his rope. He had no great faith in the young lady who called herself Avenel.

"I swear to you," she began.

"Thankee! Thet's a elegant suffishuncy. When a woman begins ter swear ett's time ter look a leetle out. I cain't even trust yer that fur. You foller me right along, quiet ez a mouse, an' I'll play fur wunst ye'r'a man. At ther fu'st sign ov foul play, down yer go. Kim on."

He slid from the rock, and then chuckled to himself.

"Thort she hed jest 'bout thet much sand, an' I warn't mistooked. When she scrambles down on ther other side she'll find some difflkilty gittin' out this way; and howsome-deavor it goes bet'ixt Avenel an' Silverado I've got her filed fur future ref'rens."

Minnie had not followed him at all, but the moment he had started, on his downward way she had slipped precipitately through the little passage, and he thought he could hear her scrambling down into the cave.

"Now fur ther gang forninst us, ez Paddy would say. Considerin' ther parole I give ter Capt'n Dick I got ter go ez though I war walkin' on aiggs. An' ef it's ther other party I'll hev ter move 'bout ez slow."

Just then "the gang" was holding a consultation.

"No danger of her getting away altogether," said the boss, hopefully, as they realized that for the present they were at fault.

"The trouble is, we can't afford to wait for daylight; and with that revolver in her hands she will be rather an awkward customer to get in a corner. Work around toward the mouth of the gulch and see if you cannot run against her. Don't be gone too long, however. I'll look after matters around here, and if she don't show up in half an hour we'll hold a council of war. It may be best for you two to cut and run for it, after all."

"An' leave you in the soup?"

"I'll look out for myself, the same as I have always done. Thanks for your interest, all the same. Now, go."

There was no resisting the sternness of the command, and the two stole away, leaving the boss to his own devices.

Hardly had their faint footfalls ceased to reach his ear when he was once more by the side of his captive.

"Now then, my friend, I think you are really too fresh to live, but sometimes such fellows can put one up to a point or two

worth the knowing, and if you are of that sort there might be a chance to save your worthless life. Tell me what you know about the Avenel matter, and the woman who calls herself Dick Avenel's daughter, and if it amounts to shucks I'll turn you loose, or leave you so you can soon get yourself free."

"And if not?"

"Then, over the range you go, in short meter."

"Crack your whip, then, I know nothing."

Dave Warner was almost himself again, and his answer was as stubbornly given as it had been to Bandy and Ben when they had tested his nerve. The man who thought to get anything from him by threat knew little of what he had to deal with.

"That's your game, is it? It sometimes does me good to deal with just such gentlemen, and make them come down from their perch. You wouldn't be quite so stubborn if you hadn't something back worth the knowing. You ought to know something about the two men who dropped you into what they were sure was a coffin and a grave. How you got out of it I confess I don't know; but the next effort will be more of a success, and we will all try to make it interesting for you as you go along. Consider over it, and if you are not ready to talk before they get back we'll put our heads together to find some means to assist you."

The boss was silent, and Dave returned no answer.

The latter understood that the stillness of the night, and the pain of the bonds cutting into his flesh, were counted on to do their work in unnerving him before he was called upon to face the torture this man was planning for him. Yet, he knew himself too well to believe he would ever weaken, and smiled grimly at the thought of dying without a sign.

"They are coming, now," said the boss, with a last effort.

"If you want to be gone when they arrive better talk fast. In another minute or so I could not save you if I tried."

"Ye'r' bloody right on that," chuckled the hoarse voice of Bedrock, as he hurled himself upon the stooping man.

"I hev arove meself, an' 'll hev a heap ter say on that same subject."

At the same time he made a desperate effort to hurl his captive to the ground.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DOUBLE DROP—AND THE MAD OUTLAW COMES.

BEDROCK had counted too much, perhaps, on taking his man by surprise. And yet, the effort he put forth would have sent an ordinary man off his feet. It seemed as though the boss must be made of spring steel, and that the touch of Primrose had simply loosened him for action.

His arms shook off the grip which tried to encircle them, and his hands shot out, to find a firm hold of the tramp.

Yet, he did not care to run more chances than were necessary, since at the same time he uttered a warning cry:

"Ho! This way, men! Quick! The devil is to pay."

Then he devoted himself silently and savagely to the game which seemed to him to be for life and death.

It was too late now to think of a weapon. From the first, in fact, there had been no chance. To loosen his grasp, or relax his efforts, even for a second, meant capture, if nothing more.

He had succeeded in rising to his full height, and on his side was keeping Bedrock as fully occupied as he could, or ever expected, to be.

There were wrenches and tugs, there were feints and trips; and then Ragged Rufe felt his foot slip, and knew the crisis had come, even before the boss took swift advantage of the mishap.

"Curse you!" he gritted as he gave the twist he felt sure would do its work; "I have you now."

He was only too successful.

Instead of dropping at his feet, Bedrock went floundering through the air, most

effectually breaking the grip which was on him and dropping into a sitting posture, some half dozen yards away, with a force that brought a deep grunt from between his parted lips.

At the same time, it seemed to do something more.

Bedrock's hands flew up, but they were no longer empty; and the leveled tubes bore straight on his antagonist.

"Come off ther roof, cully!" he exclaimed, as the sights fell into line.

"I sot down mighty hard, but ett ain't muddled me brains so I cain't pick trigger."

If the distance had only been a little less!

The boss drew himself up for a pantherish spring, while his eye measured the distance; but he saw that even his powers were not sufficient to close the gap at one bound. And that he would be granted opportunity for a second, he could not believe.

Bandy and his pard could not be far distant by this time, and if he could only hold this fellow off till they arrived, he could be sent under in short order.

"Go slow with your irons there until we see which will pay best, to throw up hands now, or go over the range a little later on. Who are you, and what do you want? I must know if I am going to better my case."

"W'y, dog-gun ye, I'm a pard ter ther man you war whisperin' to when I caught on ter ther racket, an' ef I hed downed ye on sight I wouldn't hev made no bald-headed mistake. Ett's his meat I'm after, an' ef I git it, onless he wants ter play ter git even, I ain't no more use fur you. Han's 'way up tell I cut him loose, an' then you kin shoot er skoot, jest w'ich you've a mind to."

"I'm afraid my chances wouldn't be quite as good when there were two to one as they are now; and as you have waited this long I don't imagine you would shoot a man in cold blood till you saw him doing something more than I am at the present time. Let us reason the matter a little, old fellow. I don't mean any evil to your pard, as you call him, and it would be rocks in his pocket, and yours too, if he would just listen to reason."

"Reason be durned; ye'r talkin' ag'in' time, hopin' ez Bandy an' ther other brute 'll come chippin' in. Sorry fur ye, but ef they ain't concernin' theirselves 'bout the'r own necks, along about this time, it's 'cause it's a shade late in ther day, an' they ain't no necks ter speak ov."

Primrose was willing to temporize a trifle because he saw, by a quick side glance, that Warner had got his hands loose, and was working vigorously if silently at the cords which bound his ankles. With him to his aid it would save the necessity of a shot which he did not care to take except as a last resort.

"Don't trouble yourself about those men, though they have no great love for you. Nor should this fellow have much, either, if he knows it was your rope brought him down when he was looking for the first time at the lights of Silverado. Since when have you gathered up so much love and affection for him? Does he pay better than your other boss?"

"Boss nothin'. I'm me own boss. Now then, we hev got yer."

Warner was up and busy.

Without a sound he came to the back of the boss, and with a swift grasp snatched from his belt the revolvers which swung there.

Then, he pressed one against the side of the startled man, while the other appeared over his shoulder, trained on the man with a rope.

"Go lightly, all of you!" he exclaimed, "and if you can't do that, go as lightly as you can. I'm tired trusting any one else, and to make things all safe I'll corral you both."

"Fur onadulterated wisdom that takes ther deck!" gasped Bedrock, actually astonished at the new turn things had taken.

"W'ot yer goin' ter do with us?"

"Be sure I'll put you where you'll do the most good, and you needn't worry about where it is till you find out. Here, you. Take these cords you had on my wrists and put them on those of the tramp. See you tie them a heap sight tighter, too. I don't want any getting away until I say the word."

The thing was done, almost before the order had left his mouth. The boss had no objections to putting Bedrock where he could do no harm, and perhaps thought when it was done he might be able to turn the tables on the sport. And anyhow, there was a savagery in Warner's tones which commanded obedience.

"Your turn next, my friend, and don't you try to kick or there will be cold meat. This time I am going to clean up as I go along."

The boss held up his hands for an instant, and then attempted a quick movement, which meant a close.

He was a shade too slow. Dave had him, and Dave kept him. The noose caught both wrists with the swift and sure action of a steel-trap, and now the tables were completely turned.

"Until I can tell which one is playing me dirt the deepest I'd be a fool to trust either, and I haven't time for investigation. If I catch your heelers around here I won't stand on so much ceremony; but you two, I think, I will save up for the men of Silverado to deal with. If I am not about when they arrive you can offer what explanation you chhose and if Miss Daly don't back it up I suspect it will go hard with you. So long."

He strode away with a firm, careless step, walking like a man who had made up his mind; and he left his two captives there, facing each other, and with a great deal more respect for the sport than they had a short time before.

"Dog-gone him, he'll jest nat'rally shoot ther roof off'n ther heads ov Bandy an' his pard, an' walk off 'thout 'memb'rin' us a bit. Onless you got some more ov 'em in ther bushes ett looks ez though you an' me war 'lected ter sit hyer an' starve. W'ot you thinkin' 'bout it?"

"I think that next time you won't be so ready to chip till you are sure of your man, and that if I could trust you we wouldn't be here for long. What is your price? I need such a man, and if I could buy you body and soul I wouldn't haggle over the terms."

"Thankee, pard, reely, I thankee; but sich ez I be I'm not fur sale; an' I wouldn't git ther advantage ov yer by lettin' on thet I war. We'll jest continner ter sot, an' see w'ot luck brings us."

They were a few yards apart, and it was hardly possible that there was need for either to catch the other. Primrose closed his eyes, and lolled his head back in an excess of abandon, so that he did not see what luck was bringing to the other until the boss leaped to his feet with a rasping curse.

"You have lost your last chance, now. Whether you are playing in cahoots with the hound that took my guns, or going it alone, I guess you give no one trouble after this night."

The boss was on his feet, unbound, and with murder in his eye as he reached over toward the revolver which lay a little distance from Bedrock's side, glittering in the moonlight which had begun to find its way into the gulch.

Bedrock drew his feet up for a desperate effort, but was too late.

The weapon was snatched up, the hammer went back, and there was a quick report.

It was as close a call as ever Primrose had known, and that is saying a great deal.

Nor was it want of will or skill that saved him.

A woman's hand hastily struck the weapon up so that the bullet barely missed its mark.

"No, no, Jack. Not before me, at least. If I saw you shoot down a man who was unarmed, and with his hands tied, I think I would have to kill you myself. Leave him here if you can do no better, but don't take his life with your own hand."

"Thanks for your tender-heartedness, my darling," interrupted another voice altogether.

"But don't worry about his taking any life unless it is his own. I have him foul and mean to keep him so. Hands up, Jack Randall! Dick Avenel is to the fore."

And with the order came a threat more ominous than words could make it. The locks of half a dozen guns uttered harsh clicks as the hammers went back, and half a dozen men stole forward, their weapons covering "the boss."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

WHEN Avenel hurried off to investigate the meaning of the fusillade which had interrupted his conversation with Bedrock he had a better idea of the situation of affairs than the man with the rope, because such a contingency had been anticipated, and certain dispositions made which were calculated to help the outlaws out of what might become a serious snarl.

There were only three or four men holding the position, but they did it with so much assurance and skill that the detachment of the men of Silverado which had struck them felt sure they had the main body in front of them, and moved forward with caution, in spite of the fact that the enemy seemed to be giving ground.

From a safe distance Avenel watched the fight, and rubbed his hands as he saw how exactly his directions had been carried out, and how the men of the town fell into the trap.

It was rapidly growing dark, but there was still light enough to see, here and there, flitting figures bounding up the mountain-side, firing as they went, though their bullets did no execution.

After a little the men of Silverado streamed after them, though keeping well bunched together. They saw the spot for which the outlaws were aiming, and though it offered advantages for defense it was not so impregnable that it could not be taken by a resolute charge. Of course, the horses had to be left below, but at the time that did not seem to be any great matter.

They thought differently when they reached the spot where they had seen the last of the outlaws disappear.

From here they had another fleeting view, and that was all, though they could hear for some time afterward the ringing sound of horses' hoofs, striking the rocky roadway which sloped downward from that point.

"They are off and away," exclaimed Charlie Fairbanks, who was at the head of the expedition since Randall and a couple of the men had dropped out a few miles back, to explore a promising canyon.

"I don't see anything of Dell Daly, but I reckon they toted her over the divide long ago. Now that we have flushed them there is nothing to do but keep them running. If we crowd them hard they will be glad enough to drop her out. The mad captain may not have much sense about some things, but he knows how to take care of his neck, and if he couldn't think on the subject he's got a gang that will be glad enough to think for him before we are done with him."

"That's so, too," said one of the men, who happened to be nearest.

"The trouble is to keep crowding them, and they know that just as well as we do. We may be able to get the horses up here, but it will take all of half an hour, and by that time where will they be?"

"Not as far off, may be, as you think for. Now we have flushed the game we are not much on the hunt if we lose it. One of you had better wait here for Randall, to tell him which way we went when he comes up. The rest of us don't want to be wasting any time."

It did take all of half an hour to get the horses over the rugged road, and they were none the better for their rough journey; but in course of time the men were clattering away in as hot a pursuit as they dared make.

The one man left behind had received no instructions about keeping watch for any one else save Colonel Randall, and so it was that Dick Avenel had no trouble in stalking him from behind. The first intimation he had of the presence of the mad outlaw was when a pair of steel-like fingers closed upon his neck, and a voice hissed into his ear:

"Steady, now, curse you, or you cross the range."

The warning was hardly needed, for the man was helpless as a child in that terrible grip, and as it closed tighter and tighter he collapsed altogether, hanging in a senseless mass from the hands of his captor.

"When Jack Randall comes along this trail it will be after to-night," laughed Avenel to himself as he caught up the body and swung it over his shoulder.

"Still, it may be just as well to get this

fellow out of the way. If he got tired waiting he might get to prowling around, and for the present I don't care about that."

It took some little time to get back to the cave, but when he arrived there he found half a dozen men waiting patiently, though anxious to learn how the affair had terminated.

"Good boys," exclaimed the outlaw, throwing down his burden; "it all worked to the queen's taste, and they are off on the false trail, which will give us time to get out of here at our leisure. Take care of this fellow, Tony, and [if you can't make him keep up with the procession have the rest of the boys help you. Get lights, now, and follow all. I want to see where the rats have gone to that are trying to gnaw a hole through the back door. If you sight them take them, but do no damage to their carcasses. I reckon I will be at the front, though, and can give orders when the time comes."

So, it happened that Avenel went trailing along the passage which Dave Warner and his fair charge had followed, and had come out into the mountain pocket at the very moment when Minnie Avenel, having loosened Colonel Randall's hands, was saving the life of Uncle Bedrock.

The surprise was well managed, yet it was not as complete a success as might have been expected.

"The boss" heard the challenge, and knew he was surrounded, but he was not the kind to throw up his hands when there was a chance to try fighting. The stroke of the woman, when she had flung up his pistol, had loosened his grip somewhat, and his thumb was no longer on the hammer, or he might have had Dick Avenel down before he was done talking. As the hammers of the guns around him went back the muzzle of his own began to speak, as he fired at the nearest shadows.

One man went down, and another staggered away with a sharp crease in his shoulder before Avenel, with a tigerish spring was on him.

The outlaw chief never tried to harm or handle.

He simply threw his own arms around the other, forcing his pistol close to his side, while he called out:

"Steady, boys, I have him. Take hold of him at your leisure."

With those iron arms around him and half a dozen hands clutching him, resistance was useless, and the prisoner suddenly collapsed in his efforts.

"You have me, now, gentlemen. What are you going to do with me?"

Cool, as though it did not seem to be a matter of life and death, he asked the question, and it was a pity the shadows hid the sneer with which he spoke.

"You ask that question, Jack Randall? If you are in earnest, you are more fool than I took you for. There is a long score to settle, and when we have settled and gone over it, item by item, I am afraid there will be nothing left of you to dispose of."

"I haven't a doubt about that; but when you call me Jack Randall, or any other Jack, you are away off. I never trained under such a handle, and I must say I had not previously the honor of your acquaintance."

"And you are not charmed precisely with what you see of me now," said Avenel, with a low bow.

"I expected some monumental lying, and this declaration of yours is such a weak invention that really I am disgusted and disappointed. When Silverado sees the corpse, I'll wager they recognize it, and every man-jack of them will say, 'There's all that is left of Colonel Randall.' Don't be silly, John. Take off your mask and show up your face. More than one of my boys here will recognize you; and I could swear to you as far as I could see those shoulders of yours."

Up to this time the boss had been masked. At the jeering request he raised his hands and the mask fell away.

There was an exclamation of surprise from Minnie, and Avenel himself gave a start as a set of new features was revealed.

"Old friends, are we?" the boss asked, with savage earnestness.

"Must be, or I would never have treatment like this. Better have let me alone, Dick Avenel, if that be your name. Your

hands ought to be full enough with your own affairs, without dishing into mine."

"That may be so," answered Avenel slowly, as he continued his survey.

"You don't look like Jack did when I saw him last, but perhaps I have done better than I thought for, after all. I'll hold you for what you are worth."

Bedrock heard it all, but of him no notice seemed to be taken, and he gave a sigh of relief when he saw the outlaws march away with their prisoners.

"Much obliged to 'em," he thought, "fur exqueezing me frum ther killin'."

CHAPTER XXIX.

DELL DALY HEARS THE NEWS.

DAVE WARNER had more than half suspected Bedrock was the man who so neatly lassoed him for the benefit of "the boss," and the broad hint that the man with the rope had only changed his masters for the sake of better pay bore its fruit when he had the chance to help Bedrock or leave him in the snarl. He strode away without more than a passing thought of what was to become of the man he left behind.

"When rogues fall out honest men need take no part in the riot," was the idea running through his mind.

"I got myself out of the snarl, and let him take care of himself. With two females in the neighborhood, both of whom seem to need looking after, I have no time to bother with him, or run any risks for a pard I am not dead sure will not play me false. When the real business is done I can come back and finish with the fun. And, anyway, they have nothing much to grumble over. If I meet Bandy and his pard, now, it will be quite a different thing."

He began to wonder what had become of the two men. They were hardly hunting all this time for the fugitive.

When he thought this he looked around, and recognized the fact that unless chance favored them they might spend some hours yet, and still find their quest fruitless.

The gulch was not large, but it offered more opportunity for hiding than he had thought. To search behind every boulder, and under every bush would take time. Unless Dell Daly continued her flight straight ahead she stood a fair chance of not being discovered before daylight.

And Minnie was somewhere near, no doubt, in hiding, too. He hit the truth exactly when he imagined she had retreated to the spot where they had found egress from the outlaw's cave; but, the trouble was, he could not find the spot himself. In the turnings he had made Warner lost his sense of direction, and looking up at the steep walls which shut him in he could see many boulders like that which lay in front of the opening for which he searched.

He called cautiously, once or twice, but there was no answer, and he did not linger longer at the spot where he had halted to look around. So long as he was not sure of what Bandy and his pard were doing he felt both women were in danger; but if he could run them down he would be master of the situation.

With this idea in his head he went on down the gulch, looking more for the two outlaws than for the women, but still keeping his ears open for any sounds that might come from behind.

To his surprise, before he had gone far, the valley, or gulch, came to an abrupt ending. It was, in fact, nothing more than a pocket, gashed into the mountain-side, without visible means of entrance or exit. It might be possible to scale the sides at some places, but Warner wanted daylight in which to make the effort. In the semi-darkness the attempt would be one full of danger.

Yet, where was Bandy and pard?

By the merest chance he lit upon a rope, swinging down from the edge of a rocky ledge overhead, and this seemed to answer the question.

Though they had not expected Dell Daly to find it, she had probably done so; and the two knaves had followed her. That would account for their not turning up when called for. If they had been within the confines

of the gulch, it would have been hard for them to have escaped hearing something of what was going on.

He tested the rope, and found it stood the weight of his body, and all the strain he could put on it. If he wanted to try the ascent, there seemed nothing to hinder him: and where Dell Daly could go, surely he could follow.

"If I just knew for sure where Minnie was, it would be plainer sailing," was his hurried thought.

"Until I get those two out of the way it is sure I cannot risk trying to take her over this route; and I am not so certain it will be wise to scout over it myself; but something tells me I had better take the risk. I may be of some service to Dell Daly, at least; and I can hardly altogether desert her. I got more than I bargained for when I stumbled on her trail."

He listened, heard nothing, tried the rope once more, and then began the ascent.

Here and there were knots in the rope, which made it an easier matter to retain his grip, and with the purchase he found for his feet against the rocks, the journey was not so tiresome as he had expected. He reached the ledge scarcely out of breath, and after pausing a moment to make sure that he was not more exhausted than he seemed, and to listen for the sound of any footsteps in the neighborhood, he began to move quietly away, along the one narrow, natural path which led from the spot.

Before he had gone a dozen steps he thought he heard a low chuckle, and halted with his revolver upraised.

The sound did not occur again, but something warned him to go back, and he retraced his way to the ledge.

The rope was gone, and for the present he was shut out from the gulch below.

No doubt but that Bandy and his pard had done the trick, but where were they now?

From the gorge he had lately left there came the cry of a woman, which he could have sworn proceeded from the lips of Minnie Avenel, and almost echoing it the sharp report of fire-arms.

There was something terrible going on there below, and he was barred out.

Doubtless the two men had doubled on him, and having made the descent, had managed to remove the rope in some way known to them. It was into their hands the girl had fallen, and he was powerless to help.

"Good heavens!" he groaned.

"One woman will be the same as another to them, and they will murder her before they can see their mistake. And I have thrown her life away by following the wrong trail."

"Don't worry, Mister Man," said a low, clear voice, and from where she crouched, hidden by the shadow of a rock, Dell Daly rose up.

"You may be a friend, but until I am sure of it I'll keep you covered, and keeping that idea in your noddle you can just go on and explain what is the matter."

"The matter is that a woman is below there in the same deadly peril from which you made your escape. There is no one to aid her, and unlike you she has no weapon to defend herself with. I must get back in some way, if I have to risk my neck, and take the jump."

"Another woman?" said Dell, hesitatingly, as though scarcely convinced.

"Who is she? What is she doing there?"

"I had just piloted her out of the cavern of the mad outlaw, who held us both as his prisoners. We heard something of your talk with the two ruffians who threatened your life, and were advancing to your aid when you were making ready to give them the slip. Then their master came, who sent them after you, and I had some foolishness with him. After that was over I found I had lost you both."

"Ah, you are my friend of the mountain; and in the trouble once more. This time they thought they had me, sure, but their grip was not as good as they believed. But who is this other female? And how comes it that you are interested in her? An old friend, perhaps?"

Dell Daly was not altogether satisfied in her own mind that Dave was to be trusted. While he might have good enough intentions

it was possible he was being used for some purposes that would clash with her own.

"She is the woman who was really carried off in the raid which Silverado thinks scooped you. She was not an altogether unwilling prisoner, either, since she claims the mad outlaw for her father.

"But he is not reliable, and the men behind him are worse, so I do not wonder she was anxious to get back to town before some sudden frenzy of his might work her harm."

"The mad outlaw! If those men who held me were to be believed it was he who had me brought hither. It was he from whom I fled."

"In that I believe you are mistaken," said Warner, eagerly.

"I have seen them both, and there can be no mistaking one for the other. Dick Avenel is a shorter, stouter man. You may have seen him yourself. He was at the Silver Seam in the early part of the evening. That was when I was brought into the affair. You really must pardon me if I assisted at the lively time you had there. I was called on by a lady, and had no choice."

"I do not understand to what you refer. I was not at the Silver Seam at all last night. In the early part of the evening I was already well on my way toward this place."

"And you know nothing of the game which followed, when Randall closed the bank, and raked in the house itself?"

Warner spoke incredulously; and was scarcely prepared for the outburst which followed.

"Great heavens, no! And yet I might have guessed it. I never turned a card last night, and no one else did in that house by my authority. And you say that Randall—lightnings blast him—was the winner? Who dealt the cards?"

"You did, unless all Silverado was mistaken."

CHAPTER XXX.

BEDROCK TAKES HIS TURN.

"ARE they all liars, or fools?" asked Dell hotly.

There was a mad anger in her tones which Dave Warner thought could scarcely be counterfeit, and he could pardon it as, for the first time, a suspicion darted through him of how she had been robbed.

The brace game at the Silver Seam had made this young woman a beggar and an outcast, and it might well be it was intended to end her life in the mountains. For the moment he almost forgot the woman below in his sympathy.

Yet, there was but one answer to make, if he would hold to the truth as he knew it.

"You did," was his quiet answer; "unless all Silverado was mistaken."

"If that is so the plot was deeper than I dreamed. Go on, and tell me all."

If Dell was not calmer she was at least more deadly cool, and Warner was glad to see the change. It took but a few more words on his part to tell how the bank had been broken, and how the saloon changed hands, and there was little need for more questions.

"Exactly. I see it all," she musingly said.

"Between them they cleaned out the ranch, and I was brought up here to be murdered. I would have trusted you with my life once, just on your looks; I would hate to do it now. It is life or death with Randall whether I reach the town or not, and you may be one of his tools."

An indignant exclamation from Warner scarcely interrupted her.

"If I was not one of the kind who die trying to get even I wouldn't care much who won in the race. Randall it was who rung 'In the trimmed cards, and I was fool enough to leave them there after I knew what sort of a game was spread. Go down, if you want to, though I can assure you the woman for whom you are concerned is in no danger. She it was who stood behind the table, and unless the rogues have fallen out I suspect she is only here to secure a division of the spoils. Did she wear a mask when she dealt the cards?"

"You did; or the woman whom all Silverado took for you."

"Exactly. Whether you are fool or tool makes no difference. Go to the thieves and

tell them they have not done with Dell Daly. She is free-footed, and on the way to Silverado. Here is your rope. Down you go, and when you reach the ground I draw it up again. Present my regards to Bandy and his pard, if you meet them, and say, I have a brace of bullets in reserve for them, too."

She showed the coiled rope as she spoke, and cast the one end over the edge of the ledge.

Without a word of answer Dave made the other end fast, and swung himself down. He did not know that Minnie Avenel had ever deceived him, and he was sure she was in danger.

When he reached the neighborhood of the cabin she had vanished, and the only living thing to be found there was Uncle Bedrock, who greeted him with a sneer.

"Pore kimpany be better than none, an' you an' me are 'lected ter hol' ther gulch down ter-night. Fur pure, cussed lunacy you take ther deck an' I hope ter convince yer ov it afore mornin'."

"Minnie Avenel—the young woman—have they harmed her?" was the hurried answer of Dave Warner, as he recognized the man with the rope.

"How kin I tell? Yer lef' me tied up hyer, an' when they d'parted I jest stayed. Ther war nothin' else in ther wood."

"Blame yourself, old man. You have too much mystery, and seem to carry water on too many shoulders, to suit me. I thought, though, I could trust to finding you both here on my return. If you will forget the trick, I will remedy it now, as far as I can. Do you mean to say Minnie left of her own accord, and in company with that other scoundrel?"

As the cords dropped away Bedrock straightened himself up, stretched out his arms, and gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"Gimme a breathin' spell, won't yer. I don't want ter aggerate yer bosom more ner I hev to, fur you be mighty quick ter fly off ther han'le, an' this be a case in w'ich one wants ter go slow tell ther way gits clear."

"But you can answer yes or no. I have had enough of trying to strike a blind trail, and I promise you to let you take the lead, if you have any scheme to aid the little woman. Give up this infernal mystery. What do you want?"

"Ef yer must know it, I'm after all ther fack's in ther Vanredsecker case. Mebbe you know s'uthin' ov it, an' mebbe yer don't. That's no dif. Much 'pends on ther female damsels ez makes Silverado happy by ther light ov ther countenances—when they're thar. Thar's a game fur a millyun, an' Bedrock-a-watchin' ov it. Ett kinder glides inter another one fur venge'ns, an' that's whar I'm clean puzzled how ter move. I ain't sure w'ich ov 'em orter kill ther other, an' tell I make out I'm sorter holdin' ther age, an' peekin' inter ther hands. I ain't so sure ez I keer who holds ther trumps."

"And meantime a woman suffers."

"D'yer find anything ov Dell Daly?" was the irrelevant answer.

"I found her, and she is as much of a mystery as you are, though, if she told the truth, I can't blame her for breathing fire and slaughter."

"A rough game they war playin' on her."

"Yes, but not so rough as the one you saw and never suspected."

And then briefly Warner told to Bedrock the facts in the game at the Silver Seam. What he could not make clear Bedrock understood at once.

It straightened out something which had puzzled him; but at the same time it interfered somewhat with the theory he had formed.

"That's all a true bill, young man. I war lookin' fur some 'un ter try ter make ther rifle, an' on'y lyin' back ter see w'o it war. They hed it in ter see thet the sport ov the Silver Seam croaked, an' then they war goin' ter skip ther town, an' turn up et a distan's. Must 'a' needed coin mighty bad ter try sich a desp'rit scheme."

"I cannot believe that last. It may be so that they skinned the bank. There are such tricks in the trade, though I never found it necessary to use them; but you can see for yourself they only wanted to get her out of the way for a time. It would have been as easy to leave a corpse at the edge of town as here."

"Yes, ef they didn't want ter draw out a leetle informashun fu'st. I let yer some-w'ot inter ther game back thar. Ther g'al you're mashed on ain't Dick Avenel's da'rter, an' she knows it. Dell Daly may be, an' she don't know it. An' ther mad outlaw ain't sart'in ov either ov 'em, an' so don't know whether ter kill t'other. He's got your girl ag'in."

"And you lie here, wasting time with your intolerable yarn! Which way did they go? Speak, quick!"

"Thankee, pard. Thar's two kinds ov lyin', an' I prefer ther one to t'other, jest now. He remarked, in a kinder stage whis-per ez he left: 'Ef ary pryin' rascal tries ter foller, shoot him on ther spot.' I kin show yer whar they went; but—excuse me. I'm not crawlin' through ther hole ag'in tell I'm sure thar ain't a Winchester waitin' fur me."

"What in the name of Heaven are you going to do then?"

"Wait tell mornin', an' then try a flank movement. Ett's a game w'ot are unsart'in, but ett's ther best we kin do."

And Bedrock coolly stretched himself out at full length, and gazed upward at the stars.

It was worse to Dave Warner than the cell in the cave.

Free they were, to be sure; only, they couldn't get away. Dell Daly had closed the one practicable route, and the muzzle of a Winchester in the hands of an outlaw held the other.

And here was this man, whom he could not help but think knew of some key to the situation, closing his eyes once more without a thought of all that might be going on in the recesses of the cave. It would hardly pay to quarrel with his only ally, yet he came precious near to doing it in the first few moments of his bitter anger.

Yet, the hour was late, he had been through enough to cause a strain, even on such iron nerves as his, and when he, at last, threw himself down, rest seemed sweeter than he could have thought it would be under such circumstances.

He thought over the muddle, which he was still far from understanding, and to bring it more clearly before his mind closed his eyes.

After that, the rest was easy.

In five minutes he was asleep, and in five more Bedrock rose to a sitting posture and looked across at him.

"Tit for tat," thought the king-pin.

"He left me in the lurch, and can't squeal if I return the compliment. Good-by, my darling, I must be up and moving."

He was careful not to voice his thoughts, though. Noiselessly he got on his feet, and glanced around.

All was quiet in the dingle, and if there were any unseen watchers their eyesight could hardly pierce the shadows which concealed him. Without further hesitation he moved away.

It seemed to Dave Warner that he had but just closed his eyes, when the sound of footsteps caused him to open them again. In reality, his slumber had been sound, and had lasted for a long time. He tried to spring to his feet, but the effort came too late.

A strof hand forced him back, and a hoarse voice growled into his ear:

"Lay still, dog-gun ye, thar's murder in ther air."

CHAPTER XXXI.

FRIENDS IN NEED ARE NOT ALWAYS FRIENDS IN DEED.

WHEN Dell Daly ordered Dave Warner away at the point of her pistol she was sincere in what she said.

Her only thought was to get back to Silverado, and carry the Seam with a mad charge.

If the case was once explained half the town would be behind her, and in the absence of the man who had worked the brace it would not be hard to right her wrongs with an iron hand.

Before a dozen steps had been taken her brain grew cooler, and she recognized the situation as it was.

Of her location she had not the slightest idea.

Silverado might be a mile off, or it might

be a dozen, and which way to turn to find it she dared not hazard a guess.

There were pitfalls and *barrancas* in the mountains, which well might catch her if she wandered in the darkness; while danger was near if she lingered there.

Though she had apparently cut off pursuit, she remembered Bandy and his pard had started on her trail, and might be some where in advance. She had lost some time in fruitless search before her hand had lit upon the rope by which she had been lowered into the pocket.

Her purpose became unsettled and she moved forward with a hesitating step.

The mountain-side seemed to be darker than the gulch left behind, and she had little opportunity to pick her path. In half an hour it seemed to her she had not gone a hundred yards.

Then, the clatter of horses' hoofs fell on her ear, and she knew there must be some sort of roadway at no great distance. No such reckless riding could be done over a course like to that she was pursuing.

With the sound to guide her she hastened on. It might not be safe to appeal to men who knew the mountain ways so thoroughly, but when they had passed she might find the path by which they came.

She was only too successful.

The noise seemed to leap backward, and strangely alter its changing location. It might be the echo of the rocks caused the strange difference, and yet—while she was puzzling over it some one spoke, not a dozen yards away:

"Easy, boys. Here is the spot. Give them a volley and then break for cover. They can't follow on horseback, and if they try it on foot we are good for the gang. Ready!"

A number of clicking hammers went back, and then came a scattering discharge, followed by a wild yell. The party which had fired tumbled off their horses, while the pursuers hastily pulled up and delivered a volley. The flare of the pistol-shots had shown them where to look for the fugitives; and it had shown them something else. They had passed by the spot where they should have turned from the trail, and on horseback it was already impossible to reach the fugitives.

The bullets did no damage, and only served to hasten their flight, already ordered. Without waiting to see whether they were to be closer pressed or not they headed up the slope, and by chance it was the leader who suddenly stumbled upon a crouching figure in the dark.

The uncertainty of the meaning of all this tied Dell Daly's hands. The fugitives might be outlaws; but the chances were almost as great that they were honest men. Until she was certain which they were it was dangerous to shoot, and her mind was not made up until the man went blundering over her.

Even then she was unprepared for defense on the moment, and short was the breathing spell given her. The man's arms swept around her, pinioning her closely before she attempted to rise, while he whispered in her ear:

"Fingers empty and fen scratching, whoever you are. No foolishness, now, or travel the range. We mean you no harm, but we have got to take care of ourselves."

"Who are you; and who are those?" she asked, making a stealthy but futile effort to turn her revolver so as to cover her captor.

"Oh, the truth won't hurt you, if you are the woman who claims to be his daughter. We are some of Dick Avenel's lambs, and those fools behind belong in Silverado. They have had a tough time of it, and now we are going to let them go home and go to bed. You must have got scared over the racket and cut for it, though how you got here beats me. Come along, and if you can't be trusted we'll draw your teeth and tote you. Choose quick."

"I suppose I might be in worse hands, and since I can do no better I will keep up as well as I can."

"Honor bright?"

"Honor bright."

"Good enough. Pull foot lively, and when you need help sing out."

The parole was hastily given, and as hastily

accepted. There was no time for delay if the outlaws wanted to make good their retreat without further fighting.

Indeed, the moments already lost were precious, and the men were grumbling when the retreat began again. The men of Silverado were on foot and coming.

It was a rough experience the little sport of the Seam was having, and one which tried both her nerve and strength.

The pursuers had lost sight of the game, but several times they sent scattering shots up the mountain-side, on a venture; and though they did not know it, they came too close to the outlaws to be comfortable to them. Several times the hiss of a bullet caused Dell Daly to wince, though she had thought she was case-hardened.

It might have been easy to stop all that, by calling out; but she was under parole herself, and the men with her were willing to take some risk in preference to revealing their exact position. Before long they were out of range altogether, and winding through a narrow defile, where pursuit would have been dangerous, and defense easy. It was just as well for the men of the town that they did not follow into the trap.

At last they came to a place where the traveling was rougher, and more difficult than ever, and where, tired as she was, it might have been impossible for Miss Daly to make her way had it not been for the assistance of the leader of the gang.

The touch of his hand was firm but delicate, and he treated her with a respect that was all the more grateful after the rough ways of Bandy and his pard.

"We stop here," he said, at length, when they had almost crept through a narrow passage formed by a crevice in a huge rock.

"It's ten to one they never find the trail, and if they do, so much the worse for them. What are left won't be able to get up here without daylight and ladders to help them, and by that time we can give them the grand slip."

Dell had nothing to say. She crouched up against a rock, and when one of the men offered her a coat with which to soften her couch, she accepted it with a simple word of thanks, and drooped downward again, too tired even to worry her brain over this new complication.

The outlaws rested by turns, and had no trouble in falling asleep as soon as a turn of guard duty was ended. As approach seemed impossible save in the direction whence they had come, and a single point on the other side two men could guard the approaches as well as a dozen, and from the way those two dozed over their task, it did not appear to them to be a very important one.

It was more than a surprise when there was a double report, the two sounds almost blending into each other, and a man came plunging down an almost perpendicular wall of rock, howling as he came.

He lay in a sprawling heap on the first level ground he reached, and the outlaws pounced upon him without any regard to how badly he might be hurt.

"Oh, oh! let up, dog-gun-ye!" he groaned. "I warn't a-doin' nothin' fur ye ter take a shy at me. I tell yer, I'm shot all ter pieces; cain't ye let me die in peace?"

The shots aroused Dell Daly, and when she heard the voice she recognized it as belonging to Bandy. If he had been prowling around, no doubt his pard was somewhere near, and the intentions of the two had been anything but pacific. She sprang to her feet.

"Beware of him, and the man who trains with him, and who cannot be far off. They are greater villains than yourselves, and if you let either get away you will be sorry for it."

She was not complimentary to the outlaws but told the truth as she felt it.

"It must have been his pard who shot this fellow, then; look out for him," said the leader, dragging Bandy more out into the open, so as to obtain a somewhat better view of his face.

Two of the men advanced cautiously up the rocks down which Bandy had tumbled. It would not be hard to find cover, but, if there was a resolute man above who meant mischief, they would have to vacate their present position.

But though they found the spot where

Bandy had probably been kneeling to peer over when the shot was fired, there was no trace of the marksman, and it was only a guess that he had been in ambush on another crag, a dozen yards or more away, and from which it was impossible to obtain a view of their camp. It began to look as though some one from Silverado had flanked them after all.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A DOUBLE ESCAPE, AND CHARLIE FAIRBANKS COMES TOO LATE.

IT might have been dangerous work hunting around for intruders, however cautiously it was done; but fortunately for the outlaws none attempted to hinder, and as far as they could find, they had the rocks to themselves. Whoever had fired the shot at Bandy must have beaten a silent and hasty retreat.

Cautiously they called down the result of their search, and in the same cautious tones they were ordered to remain there on the watch.

"If we can help it we do not want to move out of here before daybreak, and it may be this blundering hound shot himself, though how he could have done it unless he sat down on his dropper is more than I can see."

When Bandy was pulled forward into the moonlight he continued to groan, but from the way he applied his hand to his injury the outlaw suspected he was not as much injured as he claimed. He turned the fellow over roughly, and then gave a harsh laugh.

It had been a raking shot, that plowed through two or three inches of flesh, but was hardly likely to prove fatal.

"Quit your howling, you fool you. It's not death this time, though I don't believe you will sit down squarely for a month. I want to know what you were prowling around here for, and I want to know it mighty quick. If I shoot it will be at the other end, and there won't be any need to say kenno."

"I b'lieve ye'r right, pard, but when that shot took me frum behind I began ter think it hed bored clean up me back-bone, an' war comin' out at me throat. Mebbe yer knows how it are yerself."

"You hush on that. What I want is an answer to my question, what were you prowling around up there for?"

"Tryin' ter git away, pard."

"Get away? From whom?"

"I cain't hardly tell, but I reckon it are a squad ov galoots frum Silverado. They jumped me 'thout a word ov warnin', me an' my pard, an' we hoofed it off ez lively ez we knowed how, ez it ain't healthy fur us ter meet any ov ther boyces frum down thar."

"Indeed. And why not?"

"Kinder in ther same line ov biz ez yerselves, ef yer won't take 'fense at ther sayin' ov it, an' I war jest goin' ter sing out ez I war a frien' when that shot raked me frum behind. Ef your boys didn't shoot it I dunno who did. It warn't my pard, fur we split in ther dark, an' he's bin runnin' ther other way, ever since."

The explanation was possible, even though the fellow might not be telling the whole truth. And a few questions seemed to make it certain that if he was not in league with the men of Silverado he had seen them, since he located them exactly where they would most likely be in case they had lost the trail of the fugitive outlaws, and taken the course they would naturally follow.

"It may be as you say, though whichever way it was amounts to about the same. We have no use for you, and would not trust you further than a navy six can chuck a bit of lead."

"Jest say ther word, boss, an' I'll take ther back track. I ain't any anxiouser ter linger whar I ain't wanted, than you be ter hev me, an' ye orter know I ain't ther kind ez kin throw off on yer."

"Excuse me, but the harder you swore to a thing the less I would believe you. Your face gives you away, and I don't believe the world has much use for you. I'll see how it is by morning. I'm not sure whether to leave you trussed up here, or send you up the flume, but it will be one or the other. For fear you won't wait to see which, we

will arrange so that you have no choice in the matter."

Bandy gave a grunt, and then was silent.

He was well enough aware into whose hands he had fallen; and this quiet man, with the silken voice, awed him more than a dozen desperadoes of his type would have done. Bound and aching, apparently helpless, he lay in the shadow, and swore silently.

There was no further alarm during the several hours which remained till daybreak, and nothing further was heard from Bandy. The crumpled heap at which from time to time an outlaw glanced might have been the remains of a dead man for all the signs of life and motion that were visible.

And then, when there was a flare in the east, and the coming daylight made things a little plainer, there was a revelation.

Bandy's coat was there, but Bandy was no longer in it.

In some apparently mysterious way he had vanished; and what was stranger still, Dell Daly had also disappeared.

It was an alarming surprise, and a search brought no solution of the problem which way they had gone, and how. It hardly seemed possible that Bandy had released himself and then carried off the young lady; and after what she had said it was just as unlikely that she would have gone willingly with him.

"Sorry, but it all comes from being tender hearted," said the leader, with an unpleasant smile.

"If any of you men bring him in alive again there will be trouble in the camp."

"We didn't bring him, he brung hisself—an' he's gone out ag'in ther same way," answered one of the men with a grin.

"Let him keep on going. He had nothing to do with our job, and won't be missed if he don't sell us out to the other side. Even then, he can't do much harm. It is time we were up and moving."

They kept none the less a sharp look-out for the two as they went along, and there was a general feeling of uneasiness in the little party which was heightened as they considered the circumstances of the case.

There was no great mystery about the affair.

Bandy had been thrown aside as though he was an old boot, and of his own volition he had about as little ability to move.

For that reason but little attention was paid to him, and his position was such that unless a keener inspection than any he received had been given him it was almost impossible to make out what the little, huddled heap meant.

An hour or so after he had been laid away he heard the faintest of rustles not far away, and pricked up his ears at once. He had not been sleeping, for the pain of his wound would have kept him wide awake if anxiety over his position had failed.

Then he heard some one whisper, "Keep cool, pard, I'll be with you in a minute. Ther bloody pirates are outen ther way, an' thar's time enuf ter give 'em ther slip."

He recognized his pard, and felt like another man. With his hands free, and weapons in them, they would be able to take care of themselves, if the worst came to the worst, and flight would be possible anyhow.

The rest followed speedily. Ben cast off the cords without another word, and then began to crawl away in the direction whence he had come. Had they known that there was a watcher who saw more or less clearly their movements, they might have not gone so confidently; but so long as no one inter-offered, how could they imagine that a pair of bright eyes saw them crawl out to the extreme edge of the rock, and then vanish, as completely as though they had dropped through the air.

Dell Daly had no love for Bandy and his pard, but she thought first of all for herself.

If these men could escape in that way, it would be left open for her to follow, if discovery was at all delayed, and she had no wish to throw in her fortunes longer with the outlaws.

Impatiently she waited until Bandy had plenty of time to leave the dangerous neighborhood, and then started to follow the same route.

All worked as well for her as it had done

for the two, and though the chances were so slender, she went away with a strong hope that she would fall in with the men of Silverado.

The escape was made none too soon. It was not so far from daybreak, when there would be but slim chance of hiding or successful flight, if she was once seen. At every risk she must hasten away from the spot.

She made more progress than she was aware of, and finally believed she was doubling on the trail, and descending the mountain by the path of the night before. The dawn came up in the East, and rapidly it grew lighter; and then at no great distance she saw moving figures, apparently approaching.

The first one was that of Charlie Fairbanks, and when she felt sure she recognized him, she gave a shout, which evidently reached his ears. He looked in her direction, waved his hand, and plunged downward, followed by his men.

After a little he was hidden from view, for a gulch lay between. That made no difference to Dell Daly. With a certainty that the course taken would lead her to her friends, she hurried on, only to learn her sure thing was a mistake.

A gash in the ground barred her progress, and when she had found a way of descent, it turned out the other bank was impracticable.

While she was wandering along, scanning the clear-cut edge of the *barranca*, a rough hand caught her by the wrist, and a thick voice muttered:

"Hyer's richness. Blamed ef ett ain't ladybird, walkin' straight inter our arms ag'in. Ef she gits off this time, blamed ef she hedn't orter take our skulps with her. What'll ther boss say now?"

She was once more in the power of Bandy and his pard.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MAKING A WAY.

DICK AVENEL made no great mystery over his going, and it would have been easy enough to follow him had it not been for the truth in the hint which Bedrock had quoted. He simply went back into the cave, where he had some arrangements to make; and took his prisoners along so that he could see the better after their safe-keeping.

That he had his plans fully laid out was plain from the remark he made to "the boss" before leaving him under guard for the night.

"Sorry, sir, to keep you in suspense, but the fact is, I have other things to attend to to-night, and when you and I have our talk out we ought to be fresh as daisies, so as to be ready for the wind-up. Morning will show whether you are Jack Randall or not, and till then you will understand that I believe you are. You can fancy what a reckoning that means."

"Go on with your Greek," answered "the boss" coolly.

"As I do not even know who Jack Randall is, I can only puzzle over what strange notion might come into your crazy brain. As that would do no good I'll put in the intervening time in the arms of Morpheus. *Au revoir*."

Very coolly did "the boss" speak, and he scarcely even glanced at the woman who was being led away. He took everything as though it might be a dream, and not a particularly unpleasant one at that.

Dick Avenel watched him with a curious smile.

"To our next meeting, eh? So be it; and I can assure you I am a great deal more anxious for it to come off than you are. Here! See this!"

He held up his hands, displaying the wrists around which still clung the rings of the broken gyves.

"I have worn them more cheerfully than a woman does the golden bracelets given her by a lover. Do you know why?"

"Hardly, for they must be deucedly uncomfortable."

"You are right they are, but I have sworn to wear them until they should make their mark on the head of the man who had them

put there. And that was you, Jack Randall. Imagine, if you can, that the eye of hate cannot see through your disguise; but morning will show you different. We will meet foot to foot, breast to breast—and you will die."

"As my hands will probably be tied behind my back, and my eyes blindfolded, it is not such a bad guess at what might happen. But if you meet me as man to man, no matter who I am, you will find I can take care of my own head at the risk of yours. You cannot frighten me now, and you will not then."

Dick Avenel shrugged his shoulders and turned away. He found that his hate rendered him no match for this man, who only sneered at his threats, and mocked at his own danger.

The mad outlaw had apparently had enough of escaping prisoners, and was determined this one should not get away. "The boss" had been searched for weapons, and two men were left with him, under orders to down him at the first movement which looked like an attempt at an escape. Moreover, there was a third guard at the opening through which they had entered the cave, and the other end was held by the captain himself. Things could not possibly have been made more secure, unless by increasing the number of the cords which bound him; and that would have looked like a foolishly unnecessary precaution.

It might have been with another man, but with Jack Randall, if that was the name by which he was to be called, it would not have been too much; and it would have been better yet if the mad outlaw had clapped a gag on his mouth. "The boss" was not a man to despair, and he had a few resources yet at his command, since the search of his person was only for weapons.

And one of the guard had helped to make that search.

After the captain had left there was an interval of silence. The prisoner lay with his eyes wide open for the greater part of the time, though now and then he closed them in an apparently vain effort to sleep.

His position was sufficiently uncomfortable to keep almost any man awake, and it was no surprise to the guards that after a while it began to wear on him, and a feverish light came into his eyes as he moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

"No law against saying a word or so to you so long as it's not asking you to do anything against orders?"

He asked the question hesitatingly, and if Dick Avenel had heard him he might have thought the nerve of his prisoner was forsaking him, after all.

"Speak out ef ye'r a mind to, so ez yer don't wake ther Cap. That wouldn't be healthy fur ye, er us either. He'd come out on us with a dropper in each hand, an' sling pills regardless."

"I should think men of your style would kick on that," began "the boss," apparently encouraged by the words of the outlaw.

"If I was in your place, and saw a chance to make a cool thousand, I'd grab for the stake, and let the captain flicker. When he gets a fit on he don't always shoot wild."

"Plumb center, always. An' thar's why I wouldn't try ter sell him out, not fur twice ov it. He'd be on ther trail, fast enough, an' come with a roll thar would be no gettin' away from. Say something else, Mister Man. We don't want to fool you; and Cap knows he kin trust us."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of trying to tempt you. But I don't suppose I am to be tortured any more than is necessary, and if one of you chose to play good Samaritan not even Dick Avenel would raise a howl."

"That's so; an' ef a drink ov water kin help ye thar's some in my canteen."

"Good enough if there was nothing better in reach. But there is a private flask in my hip-pocket that I would give a ten-spot to sample just once, even if you divided what was left between you. One of you can keep me covered while the other does the job, and so you will be sure there is no danger of my cutting up rusty."

"No danger of your tryin' that with those strings on, an' I'm glad you spoke, fur I'd clean furgot that same flask. Ef it will reely do yer good thar's nothin' ter hinder. But we may ez well do ez he sez,

so ez ter be dead sure thar's no game behind it."

"Ef there's a ten-spot to be found alongside ov it, sure," added the other cautiously.

He was not so much of a philanthropist that he did not live up to his motto of, all you can.

"You will find the ten there, too, but I suppose you will hardly stop at that. Gents of your stripe seldom content themselves with the tailings when they can clean up the sluice-box."

"Do you think we want to rob you, pard?" asked the original speaker of the two.

"A ten will do fur ther first swaller, but mebbe you'll be wanting some more. May ez well leave some funds in ther bank ter dicker with."

He approached as he spoke, and stooping found the flask, sure enough.

It was a leather-covered affair, with a screw top, but minus the cup which usually accompanies such things.

"Hev ter take it by word ov mouth," he continued, as he opened and then applied it to the prisoner's lips. "Drink hearty. In ther long run et ain't costin' yer a cent."

The throat of the boss worked three separate times before he made a motion which indicated the flask might be taken away.

"Guess I will have to make it thirty after all. If you taste it you will understand the reason why I am willing to pay the price."

The outlaw winked knowingly.

"We're in a land whar good lik'er are skeercer than lead an' steel; an' thirst ain't allers ter be squinched with water. Bein' ez you invite, we ain't too proud ter sample ther leavin's."

He raised the flask with a nod, and took a long, lingering pull.

"Ah, that's ther stuff a real gent kerries. Old Otard, forty year ov age, an' goes down like ile. Pard, you better not try ett. Ett's monstrous heady."

He smacked his lips, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and then looked longingly at the flask, as though he was debating the advisability of finishing it altogether.

The other guard snatched it away from him with a growl.

He held it up to the light, though there was no chance to see the contents through the leather covering. Then, he gave it a gentle shake, listened to the melodious gurgle, and proceeded to drink even heartier than his companion had done.

"It is up to the standard, I fancy," said the captive with a smile.

"Now, if there is another swallow left for me I think I can sleep the sleep of the righteous till morning and the captain arrive."

Once more the flask was at his lips, and when it was taken away he fell back with a gentle sigh and closed his eyes leaving the nearly emptied flask to the guards.

He did not immediately go to sleep, but he rested contentedly, and after an interval of five minutes or more his regular breathing seemed to indicate that he had turned the corner.

"Takes it cool," said one of the guards, with a thickness of tongue he was far from suspecting.

"Wisht I could take about a yard off'n ther same stick. Don't see why ett takes two ov us ter watch one man, an' him tied. Flesh an' blood can't stan' ett tell mornin', an' we better go fur ett now than wait tell we both go 'round ther corner."

"Sleep ef yer wants ter," answered the other sulkily.

"I'll wait tell ther Cap makes ther grand rounds. I want er chainece ter wake ag'in."

"Dog-gone ett, can't yer wake me up when yer hears him comin'?"

"Ef I hear him—yes. But ther chaineccs are mighty slim that yer knows he's on hand tell he's hyer; an' then, it's too late."

"All right, all right!" mumbled the other, half opening his eyes, to let them close again. "F-f-five minutes are all—I want."

Lazily his companion muttered.

"Let him go. I feel that way meself, but reckon I know more than ter shet me eyes. Ef I do, I'm a gon'er."

He gave a sudden start, and 'rose unsteadily to his feet. It seemed to him the prisoner was watching him through half-closed lids, and that there was a mocking smile on his face.

Things went 'round and 'round, and he lurched forward like a drunken man. For some reason the contents of the flask had been too strong for him.

He steadied himself, gazed downward at the prisoner, who never winced as he strove to draw his revolver, and then seated himself again. Before he could gather the resolution for another struggle he too was asleep.

"Poor devils!" thought the prisoner, a little later, as he raised himself up and began to tug cautiously at his bonds.

"They drank enough out of that bottle to put a dozen men to sleep, and I only wish the captain could take half the dose that threw him. They have me tight enough, and it may be I am none the better off for closing their eyes, but it gives me the chance to fight for it; and then, there may be help coming in the distance."

Even while he thought this a form came gliding out of the darkness, and moved silently to his side.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DICK AVENEL GATHERS IN HIS GAME.

"Hist!" said a low voice.

"I came as soon as I could, and there is no telling how soon I will be missed, though the mad captain will hardly believe I dare run the risks he was careful to explain. Let me aid you."

The speaker was Minnie Avenel, and if her coming was a surprise it was by no means an unwelcome one.

"You are right, I will let you help me. I was just beginning to think I had only made a bad matter worse. Ah, you have a knife. So much the better. Cut them loose. No time to waste on knots."

The cords dropped away in haste, and Randall took the weapon from her hand.

"These two fools will sleep till morning, so there is nothing to fear from them, and the first thing to do is to make our way back into the pocket."

"Remember, there is a guard there, too."

"Leave him to me. With hands free, and darkness behind him, one man has but little chance with—Jack Randall. Follow me, and on your life be silent. When I give you the hint, remain where you may be until I tell you to come on. I am afraid it is going to be a cold day for that guard."

They wasted no time in discussing plans, but crept away as swiftly as was consistent with silence, and their progress was more rapid than could have been expected. Before long they were on the floor of the cave immediately below the opening which led to the outer world.

The woman must have suspected what would be likely to happen, yet she gave no sign when the man whispered to her to remain. He climbed up the wall, and was gone what seemed a long time, though it was only minutes measured by sensations. When he came back there was no tremor in his voice, nor in her hands as she scrambled up; and there was no surprise that they made their way out unchallenged.

They turned toward the cabin in which Dell Daly had been confined, and reached it without seeing a thing or a living soul. The pocket seemed tenantless, save by themselves, and all they feared was the pursuit which would follow were their escape once known.

"Remain here a moment; and I need not tell you to keep your ears and eyes open. Dick Avenel is a man who is never more than half asleep, and to-night I doubt if he closes his eyes. If he discovers you are gone his first thought will be to look for me. After that, numbers will tell unless we have the advantage of a surprise, and whether he pierces my disguise or not he will have no mercy with the man who got away with his guards."

He left her there, with every nerve tingling, and all her senses on the alert. Entering the cabin he closed the door carefully behind him, and though one minute dragged itself after another in slow procession, he did not reappear.

The night was more nearly over than she thought. In the pocket it would be some time before they could see the face of the sun, but there was already a glow along the

trace line of the cliffs above which told dawn was coming fast.

She called cautiously, but there was no answer. In spite of the silence she began to be nervous, and felt that she could no longer stand the suspense alone. She crept nearer to the cabin, listened, and at last looked within.

All was dark there, and she could hear nothing. For the first time she thought of desertion, and a thrill went through her frame. Her courage partially gave way, and when she thought she heard a sound of footsteps rapidly approaching she turned and fled.

The move was perhaps the worst one she could have made, since it brought her directly out of the shade of the cabin. The steps sounded louder, and now they were aiming directly for her, so that they rapidly came nearer. She was no match for the runner behind, yet flight was her only chance since the knife she had put into Jack Randall's hand was her only weapon.

She could not hide herself in the darkness as Dell Daly had done, and there was no spot of refuge toward which she might turn. Instinctively she looked back over her shoulder, and that act precipitated the catastrophe. Her foot caught, she stumbled, and fell.

A confusion of voices arose not far away, and hardly had they reached her ears when strong hands seized her, and once more she was a prisoner.

The touch of the ground seemed to have renewed her courage, and when she was helped to her feet she looked calmly around her.

Nothing was to be seen of Randall and if what she heard went for anything he had not yet been sighted by the men who were so eager to catch her.

The man who had seized her held her; the rest rushed on, for there had been several following in her wake. She heard voices also at the cabin, where a search was being made, but as yet no exultant cry which signified that Randall was in sight.

Then came silence.

The searchers had caught sight of a pair of crouching figures, one of which seemed to be struggling with the other, and the sight had made them cautious. Only, Dick Avenel himself rushed forward, revolver in hand, and covered the two with a certain aim.

"Steady, you there! Up, and let us see who you are. And no nonsense. I am running no risks, and don't you forget it."

"Dog-gun him, ain't that what I bin tryin' ter tell him war ther how ov ther whichness. My hands are up, an' ef hissen ain't, let me move out ov range afore yer begins shootin'."

"And who in high Hades are you?" snarled the chief of the outlaws as he looked the speaker over.

"And where did you come from; and what are you doing here?"

"Honest Pete, be I; an' I'm more lookin' fur a pard ov mine, one Ragged Rufe, than anything else. Et ther same time I'm doin' a bit ov perspectin', fur I hev hit it rich in my time, tough ez I look, an' I'm hopin' ter turn ther trick ag'in afore I die."

"Honest Pete, eh? One of the little tin angels from Silverado, if I'm not mistaken in the name. But how did you happen here?"

"That's ther word exack'ly. I happened. Slid down a rope 'thout ary idear whar it would lead to."

"And this fellow slid along with you, I suppose."

The muzzle of Avenel's pistol indicated Dave Warner, and his finger was on the trigger as he spoke. There was an unpleasant ring in his voice, too. Just then the mountain pocket was not the safest of places for interlopers.

"Him I d'unno from a side ov sole leather. Every tub must stand on his own bottom, an' he kin speak fur himself."

"I recognize him, now, and you needn't say another word about him. It's the little joker, himself. Now you see him, and now you don't. He was a guest of mine, and as such was sacred. He preferred to be something else, and must take his chances. Sooner or later the man who plays Dick Avenel false is called up to the captain's office to settle. Where is Jack Randall?"

"Pon me soul, I wish I knew. Him an' me hez an account ter settle, an' I'll be puttin' in me claim hot ef I kin ever git him whar his heelers won't double-team me."

"Yes, I heard something of the cause of action supposed to lie between you two, but I am not sure how much of it to believe. This other man, perhaps, can tell. I know he is one of the gang, for he is the chief backer of Randall's tool. Speak up, man, and save your brains. Where is 'the boss?'"

"I left him bound, ready for your hands. If you allowed him to get away it is your own loss, not mine. I don't want him. And until I do I shall not trouble myself about the question."

"That is your answer now. By and by you will sing a different tune. Here, you take care of these men till I see what is going on in front."

Two of his men had remained with Avenel, while the rest, when they had taken a glance at the two prisoners, went on in search of the fugitive. The quick ears of Dick Avenel noted they had something in sight.

When he reached the spot where Dave Warner scaled the precipice he gave a shout. Bandy and his pard had got back, and with them they brought Dell Daly.

And the capture of the three had been the simplest thing in the world.

Bandy had found the rope where Dell had thrown it aside, and lowered himself into the pocket. Then Miss Daly was sent down, and Ben followed.

When all three were safely on the ground the outlaw, who had been watching them come, stepped out with leveled weapons, and demanded a surrender.

"Three more for early breakfast," laughed Avenel, as he peered into the troubled faces of his latest captives.

"Now, if we can hunt up that old fool with a rope, the court will be ready to commence its session. Between them all it will be hard if it can't come to the bottom of what this all means."

"But, captain, the man who soaked poor Charlie?"

One of the men ventured to make the suggestion, though it was hardly possible Avenel could have forgotten.

"Never mind him. He will be in the dock when the time comes for the trial. Bring them along! There are two girls who think they are Dirk Vanredsecker's daughter; and by heavens, I have them both."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A CRAZY COURT.

THE force of the outlaws seemed to have been augmented by fresh arrivals, for there were enough men in the pocket to hold the prisoners, with a sufficient reserve to watch the approaches.

This time, however, Dick Avenel did not intend to altogether trust in cords which could be cut, or guards who could be put to sleep. When he had bunched his prisoners pretty well he gave a signal and they were handcuffed together with neatness and precision, two and two.

The absence of Bedrock seemed to give the captain trouble, for he ordered the search continued, even after it seemed almost certain that every available hiding-place had been vainly explored.

It was an odd-looking court which was called to order in the pocket, and it was hard to tell which the majority of the prisoners most feared, that they would, or would not get justice.

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes! Dick Avenel, the mad outlaw, is holding court for the last time. Let those who have business before it speak now, or forever after hold their peace. Let all others retire!"

The captain held a revolver in each hand, and as he glanced along the line of his men they gravely turned and filed away, leaving him alone with his chain-gang. His glance turned to the prisoners, and first of all he singled out the Dead Game Sport.

"Dave Warner, what have you to say why sentence of death should not be pronounced upon you?"

"That I have done enough in my time to deserve shooting. Heaven knows," was the contemptuous answer; "but I deny your jurisdiction in the matter. From your own

showing you are crazy as a loon, and so not fit to decide on matters of life and death. I demand a continuance until you are in your saner moments, and then I will convince you that there is nothing of which you have any right to accuse me, whatever other courts might do."

"About what I expected from a man of your caliber. Mad I am, of course, but not any madder than the rest of the world, and the boys have every confidence in me that I am sane enough to do business. They never prospered in their calling until I was at the fore, and since then we have hardly been able to find sacks enough to carry the boodle—which is the true test of fitness. They are parting with me with many regrets, and for the sum of five thousand as a bonus, in addition to their natural love and affection, they helped me in this, the crowning effort of Dick Avenel's career."

"Sorry to say I don't know what you are driving at. I came out to the help of a woman against the mighty, but I can't see that I have done her much good, or you any harm. She seemed to think she was your daughter, but from the way you have received me I begin to believe she is mistaken. Crack your whip, I have nothing more to say."

"I half believe you tell the truth, and that you are suffering now with old dog Tray's affliction—that of having been found in bad company. If it was not necessary to make a complete clean-up, I would be inclined to let you go. As it is, we will hold your case under consideration until the rest are disposed of. I have heard of you as a man of your word, and I may have use for you after all."

"And now, you, sir. Who are you? I asked you the question once before; this time I want a fuller answer."

"Ez I said then, I'm Honest Pete."

"Honesty goes no more in a name than it does anywhere else, and Pete for a handle will not stand alone. Pete—what?"

"Pete nothing, if you want to say it that way; but Peter Vanredsecker was the name I started in to go to dinner by. I've had misfortune, an' I've bin robbed tell I've got so fur down I don't keer ter use it, but I've got ther good blue blood all the same."

There was a momentary change in his voice and even appearance, but it was only a flash in the pan, and the next instant he was the worthless tramp prospector again.

"A good man, you count yourself, and honest as times go?"

"That's 'bout ther size ov it."

"And you wouldn't have harmed your brother Dirk, or his daughter, for the world?"

"Nary harm, ef I could 'a' found him; but I couldn't, an' I looked long ernuf afore I give him up ez lost in the fire. Ef you know so much 'bout ther family, it's no use ter tell yer what that means."

"Not a bit. I understand it only too well. Just as well as though I had seen you apply the match, or rivet these bracelets on my wrists."

He held up his arms so that the steel rings showed below the cuffs of his wrinkled sleeves, while Pete answered sulkily:

"That's two lies, an' are meant ter be sich. You know it."

"Ha, ha, Peter! What sort of a fool do you think I am that you should try to play such a game on me? Mad? Who wouldn't be mad when they were herded with their own fancies for a year, with no occupation but counting one's fingers and toes in the dark? And that after a straight course of a year or two with howling lunatics. Bless your soul, man, did you think I was never to get out?"

"They allers said you war a fool, Dirk Vanredsecker, an' now I know it. I look like a party ez could do them things."

"Looks go for as little as names, as you will find out when you get through with this court. Oh, I have a bitter account to settle with you—which one of these women do you call Dirk Vanredsecker's daughter?"

He broke off suddenly with the question, and pointed toward the two women, who were listening with eagerness tinged with horror.

"No use ter ask me that. You give it away when you picked her out yerself, though I knowed it afore Jack Randall

brought her ter ther front. Thar she stan's, deny her ef ye kin."

He pointed at the girl who claimed the name of Minnie Avenel, and she, shrinking back a little, nodded her head with a ready acquiescence.

"You are backsetting Jack Randall's game as though you belonged to him bone and body. She is as much Dirk Vanredsecker's daughter as I am your brother. Quite a family reunion this would be if you could be believed. What is it that you expect?"

"Jestice," answered Pete, with a wave of his unfettered hand.

"And I want—revenge. You have appealed to the court for the one thing it would give you, for when you get the one I have the other. Are you ready to receive it?"

Honest Pete looked narrowly at the man—stared at him as though puzzled by an enigma which did not appear on the surface.

When he spoke it was slowly and with downcast face.

"I ain't bin prospectin' hyer, thar, an' everywhar fur all these years 'thout learnin' to take chances ez they come, but when I have ter choose I want a show for my white-alley every time. What show be you goin' ter give me, so thet it won't be all revenge on your side, an' nary jestice on mine?"

"More show than you were ever willing to give Dirk Vanredsecker, you hound, you! I'll give you the knife with which a better man than you are was stabbed, while I take only the weapons you had forged around my wrists. The man who lives goes away to enjoy the Vanredsecker million—if he can get it."

"Han's free?"

"Yes. Hand to hand, breast to breast, foot to foot, and Dave Warner here to see fair play."

"Then—I'll save my life ef I have ter take yourn. You are crowdin' me too hard, jest ez you used to; an' jest ez I used to, I'll strike back. Give me ther knife, set me han's free, an' I'll take keer of meself fu's, an' then go back an' see Dirk's gal gits what's due her. You got to ther end ov yer rope, an' I may ez well haul it in."

There was a smile on the outlaw's face, which deepened into almost a grin, as he stepped forward, and coolly unlocked the fetter which bound Pete and Dave Warner together. Then he cut the supplementing rope around the wrists of the man of honesty.

"Stand over there a moment and get your circulation up. Don't tempt me to speak to you with a six before the fight begins, for like you I want a show for myself, every time. And you, Warner, sit there and be quiet. Really, you can do nothing else, but I want to save you the mortification of defeat. Tell me when you are ready, Peter."

"I'm always ready."

He had taken the position indicated, and now Avenel cast the knife with a careless swing, that sent it to Peter's feet. The point was downward, and the hilt, standing straight up, was easy to grasp. At the same time Avenel cast off his belt of arms.

Then, he stepped forward a pace or two, and the men stood watching each other with pantherish eyes.

There were rapid feints, thrusts and strokes, and after a time the outlaw suddenly changed his tactics. He kept his body well guarded, but he pressed the attack with a savage vigor that threw the other altogether on guard until, without warning, the climax came.

Avenel pushed aside the descending band of his adversary, and at the same time swung his right around.

There was the same savage thud as that heard upon the streets of Silverado, and Honest Pete went down in the same sort of a crumpled heap.

Avenel never gave a second glance at the body.

"One down and another come on," he said, with exultation in his tones as he turned to the two women.

"And you claim to be Dirk Vanredsecker's daughter?"

"I claimed to be Dick Avenel's daughter, which amounts to the same thing," firmly responded Minnie, to whom the question was addressed.

"Does it? And you?" looking at Dell Daly.

"I know nothing about Dick Avenel save what I have heard of the record he has made as an outlaw, and what I have here seen for myself: and I know nothing about Dirk Vanredsecker, whoever he may be, save that I am his daughter, and I can prove the fact."

"You are dead sure of that, I suppose?" he asked with a cruel gleam in his eyes, and his fingers trembling slightly as he adjusted his belt of arms.

"As sure as one can be of anything less than a royal flush in a game with a square man."

"Ha, ha! And between you all, you thought to corral a million! No million for you, but the grave. You, fool and impostor, thought by claiming to be the outlaw's daughter to bolster up your fraud, and yonder carrion never knew until the last minute that it was not his own brother whose life he was seeking."

"Who, then, are you?" asked Minnie, breathlessly.

"I am the true Jack Randall, whom yonder corpse tried at times to personate. I am the heir in reversion. I am the man to whom the million will come. I sweep you all out of the way, and go back to enjoy my own. You both have heard too much, you know too much, to live. You must rest in the same grave, now and forever."

The madness in his eyes burned more brightly than ever, and even Dell Daly cowered back as his hands suddenly caught at his pistols, for she felt that her hour was come.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HONEST PETE'S LAST THROW.

DELL DALY had courage beyond most women, and would make as bitter a fight for her life as the best of them could she have the chance, but of late the drop always seemed to be on her, and the fortunes of war always on the other side. From the first she had felt her life hung on a thread, and had declined to increase the pressure for fear that thread might snap.

Adventure or not, Minnie Avenel, as she professed to be, had trusted to her claims to secure at least a hearing from the mad outlaw, who, to her mind, was much saner than report held him. Of the grand mistake made by the man who posed, now as Colonel Randall, and again as Peter the Honest, she had no inkling till the present moment.

And now, if this statement of the outlaw was true, there was little hope for either of them.

With the fire of madness blazing in his eyes he stood there, without a doubt willing to do the double murder for the million; and the two victims could do nothing save close their eyes and await the shots.

Then—"swish!"

A snaky coil shot downward, a noose settled around the wrist of the outlaw, and a great tug at the rope brought him out from under the overhanging wall of rock which had concealed his body from sight of Uncle Bedrock, lurking above.

"Reckon I got me rabbit, now; ther next thing are ter 'tend ter ther cookin' ov him. Unless I shoot him off hand ett's goin' ter be quite a circus. An' I never did shoot a man yit thet hed no chainece ter d'fend hisself."

In default of a pard to hear him Bedrock had so often talked to himself it had almost become second nature to air his opinions when there were no listening ears to take them in. He was not standing around with his hands in his pockets, either. Dick Avenel at one end of the rope was, or would be when he had recovered from the surprise, almost as strong as Ragged Rufe at the other.

The cast had not been made upon a sudden impulse. Primrose, crouching among the rocks twenty feet above the level of the pocket, heard the proceedings in the outlaw's court, and decided long ago that he would have to take a hand in. Just such a possibility as this had been contemplated, and he had picked out a jutting spur of rock some four or five yards away, as the thing to which he might fasten his rope when once he suspended the outlaw.

The work was done with marvelous rapid-

ity. Squirming in silence, ravening inwardly, flecks of foam tinged with blood around his deeply bitten lips, the mad outlaw strove to raise himself until he could grasp the rope with his free hand; and while he struggled in mid-air Primrose was scrambling recklessly down the rocks to reach the prisoners below.

"Hyer, you. Hold up your hands," he shouted breathlessly, as he sprung to the side of the girls.

"I kin pick locks, an' ef I cain't I kin break 'em, an' ther sooner you hev yer han's free ther better. I may need yer when I cage ther wile-cat."

It might have been more prudent to have first caught up the pistols which had dropped from the outlaw's hands, but Bedrock had calculated the time at his disposal to a nicety, and his work was done accordingly.

"Keep cool," he sternly ordered, as he saw the hands of the women fall apart.

"Thar's plenty ov work ter be did afore we come to ther shoutin'. Your turn next, pard."

He turned toward Dave Warner; and at that instant there was the sharp report of a Winchester, and Bedrock pitched heavily to the ground.

At the same time, the outlaw captain managed to slip the noose from his wrist, and come down with a crash.

He glared around him like a fiend, darted for the revolvers he had lately dropped, and then sprung toward the women.

"Win or lose, by the Imps of Tartarus, I'll clear the way as I go!"

His eyes were fixed upon Dell Daly and her companion, who still stood close together, and he overlooked Bedrock entirely, whose body lay almost at his feet. The same mad fury of murder was in his eye that had been there before the cast of the rope, and no pleading of theirs would have gained a stay of execution. It looked as though there were only seconds for them to live in.

It was Dave Warner who took advantage of those seconds. His hands were gyved together, but at last he had loosened the cords on his feet. He bounded upright, and gave a wild spring which carried him to the outlaw's side, the circle of his arms dropping over Dick Avenel's head, forcing his outstretched arms downward until they reached the level of his waist, and pinioning them there.

"I haven't been doing much, of late," he hissed into the outlaw's ear; "but now that I'm in it you can bet I've come to stay."

Not much doubt could there be of that, for as long as flesh and blood could stand the strain there was no danger those hands would be forced apart, held together as they were by the fetters of steel.

There was an angry snarl, a fierce tug, and then the two men rolled upon the ground together.

The effort was vain. Whatever of prodigious strength the outlaw might have was effectually hampered. Warner was stronger than most men, himself, and he knew that if no interference came from without his trap was successfully sprung, and there could be no escaping from it.

The courage in the women asserted itself. They bounded to the side of the man who had saved them, and bending over brought an aid that was not to be despised. Bedrock had left the fetters from their wrists un-snapped, and Dell Daly knew the manner of their working. Between them they forced the wrists of Dick Avenel together, and before he knew what they were after he was manacled.

"Safe again," breathed Minnie, though her face was white with emotion, but Warner, remembering the shot which had just downed Bedrock, caught up the pistols of the captain in his still manacled hands, and looked warily around.

"They are coming again, but this time there will be a good account to credit!" he exclaimed, as he caught sight of half a dozen men armed with Winchesters, hastening toward them from the direction in which the outlaws had retired.

Without waiting for challenge he would have opened fire, but Dell Daly was too quick for him. She had recognized Charlie Fairbanks in the front, and threw her arms out before Warner, exclaiming:

"Hold! They are my friends, come at last to the rescue. This way, Charlie! You are none too soon."

There was a shout from the men of Silverado, who saw, or thought they saw, caution was no more needed, and they came with a rush.

"It has been considerable of a chase, little woman, but it looks as though it had ended all right," said Fairbanks as he extended a hand to warmly grasp one of Dell Daly's and then looked at the other girl in a puzzled sort of way.

"I don't know," she answered, turning from him to Bedrock, who lay where he fell.

"I am afraid this poor fellow has his last sickness, and to him we owe it that we are still in the land of the living. Some of you help Warner off with his bracelets while I look at the man of the rope. He may not be dead, after all."

"If what you say is the truth then there has been a mistake somewhere. Hank Hardy took a sitting shot at some one, from the rocks above, and it is two to one he hit the wrong fellow."

"And won't weep over it, either," whispered one of the Silverado men, who bent with them over the body. "He got away with Hank's baggage lately, and I reckon Hardy thinks, now, they are about even. I thought he was blame modest when he talked about it, and didn't care to come down. He's not generally willing to stand on guard when there's a show for work somewhere else."

"Don't be excited about the vagabond. He is tough as sole leather, and no bones are broken, nor vital points reached. It is the shock that ails him. He'll be up and about by the time we are ready to move."

Fairbanks was a fair amateur surgeon, and a hasty examination revealed enough to enable him to give his prognostication confidently.

"Now for the prisoners. Who are those?"

He pointed viciously at Bandy and his pard, who had been silent and trembling spectators of the whole drama.

"They are the biggest villains of all," answered Dell Daly. "They were not only the tools who carried me off, but the thugs who were going to murder me on their own account had not their master turned up. They don't belong to this man's gang at all. He, you can see for yourself, is as crazy as they make them, and if that asylum that is yearning for him can only be located the best plan is to send him back there."

"And who is that?"

Fairbanks pointed at the little heap of manhood, which just then seemed to stir uneasily.

"That, if my ears have not deceived me, is the man we used to know as Honest Pete. He is also—or was—some one else. Perhaps, if you dig down deep enough, you will find Colonel Randall under his masks. I thought he was dead, but it looks as though there was some life in him. Look out for him!"

The heap was slowly straightening up. Probably consciousness had returned some time before.

In his fingers he held the knife which he had been clutching when he fell. With his other hand he swept away the mists that were hanging over his eyes. Then he flung his right hand around, with a swiftness that was all unexpected, and the blade left his fingers.

Strength, indeed, he lacked, but the distance was short, and his aim true. The mad outlaw fell back, just as Honest Pete collapsed again; and Bedrock began fairly to recover his senses.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CLEARING OF THE SKIES.

THE force from Silverado was well armed, and every man in the mountain pocket could be trusted. Though they did not care to linger there, it was impossible to move away at once, and they halted without any fear of the consequences.

It was not wise to pursue their investigations too far, but the general opinion—afterward found to be the truth—was, that when Dick Avenel dismissed his band at the open-

ing of his court the understanding was, the separation was to be final. Before the men from the town came upon the scene the outlaws were far from the spot.

Mad as the captain undoubtedly was he did not care they should witness the deed he contemplated.

So far as Ragged Rufe was concerned, Charlie Fairbanks proved to be a true prophet.

The man with the rope had received a rather rough shaking up, but he came around all right, even sooner than was expected.

"Pears ter be ther same ole world," he ejaculated, rubbing his head, and then looking at the hand on which was a broad stain of blood.

"Thar's ther w'im in ther case, an' ther bad villains, an' hyer's ther good angel, ther same ole, ricketty, racketty, ragged Rufe, willin' ter borry a quarter, er start at short notiss on ther trail ov crime an' blood."

He spoke at large, but Dell Daly turned sympathizingly toward him. In spite of the horrors of the scene, she could feel her heart grow warm for him.

"Yer don't know ett, my dear, but I'm slightly connected with ther Vanredsecker's myself. I war startin' fur ther bosom ov me fambly when I got a deespatch an' a letter w'ich sent me down hyar ter unroll ther myst'ry thet hez bin hangin' over ther house fur so many year. Rufus, junior, couldn't 'a' done it better; an' I reckon a'rter w'ot you heard, ett ain't no use fur me ter explain. Ef Peter ain't dead yit, I'd like ter know his object' a-wringin' in on me ez a pard; but altergether, it'll be ez healthy fur him ter go outen ther wet hyer ez elsewhere. Ef he's sleepin' I won't try ter call him."

Unsteadily he made his way to the side of the man who had posed under the two masks at Silverado.

There was some life in him, but it was going fast. The wonder was that he should be conscious at all.

As Primrose looked down at him his glassy eyes rolled around and stared up into the face of the king-pin tramp.

"Pard, I da'ssen't say ez I'm sorry, fur betwixt you two thar war'n't much ter choose; but ef I kin do you ary good now, I'm yourn ter command. Better le'mme bandage up them brains ov yourn, an' see ef ther pieces he's left yer skull in are w'uth ther movin'."

"I'll never move from here," answered the wounded man, faintly.

"Any help of yours would only be torture. Let me die. I have the satisfaction of knowing that he went over the range first."

He spoke with the voice of Colonel Randall now, and it's sound was a surprise to some of the Silverado men, who even yet had not understood how matters really were.

"He's gone, pard, but on a squar' deal you would hev hed no bizzness with his game," answered Bedrock, who with fingers trained to softness was examining his hurts, in spite of what had already been said.

"He went with his han's tied."

"Curse him, what matter does it make how it was so that he went? If I had not believed it was Dirk himself, I would never have been crazy enough to have had Minnie try to have him acknowledge her as his daughter. When the fit wasn't on him he knew as well as could be they would hang him if he went back East, in spite of his million. And I thought he was brother Dirk. Well, well."

His mind wandered for a bit, and he closed his eyes; when he opened them again, Primrose was still with him.

"Ah, I know you too. I knew you from the moment, that night up the mountain, when you bucked under the spur. You are Primrose, the detective. I had forgotten the name, but when I heard it I remembered. You came here to work up the Vanredsecker case, and I thought I could use you in my hand."

"Partly right, an' partly wrong, but letter go ett that. Ef I ain't ther rose I've lived mighty nigh ter it, an' on ther trail ov crime I'm a holy terror, ef I say ett meself."

"Yes, if I could have had you bring Minnie and me back in triumph it would have helped clear the way amazingly. And I

would have done it, too, but for the Satan's luck, that stranded me at last."

"S'kassly, me frien'. I knowed frum ther jump thet you war ther boss ez played roots on me, up on ther mount'in. An' I knowed, too, ez he war ther Kunnel Randall w'ot sported 'round Silverado."

"Yes. If I had only known who signed Dick Avenel's name to the letter to Dell Daly things would have gone differently."

"Perhaps. But letter go at that. You've hed yer talk out, an' I've hed mine. Best keep quiet now. Whisky mightn't be good fur ye, but ef ye want a drop?"

"I want none," answered the colonel, with such eagerness as his lips could muster; "but there is a flask in my pocket if you would take it."

"S'kassly. Ett might not be good fur me 'hullsme. I take no stock in ther brand Kunnel Randall kerries. Ef yer changed yer duds in ther cabin I guess yer didn't furt git ter change yer flask with 'em."

"That is so," sighed the colonel.

"It is the flask I filled for Dell Daly. When she gets the million she mustn't forget you. I suspect I am going now. I feel strangely weaker."

He began to speak in gasps. From the outset Bedrock had known there was no hope for him, and his only surprise was that the wounded man had lasted so long.

There was one person in the party as it bunched together preparatory to leaving the pocket, who had certainly sinned, however much she might have been sinned against.

How far the young lady who called herself Minnie Avenel was or had been in the colonel's counsels was a question that was not asked of her.

It was evident he had intended to present her as the daughter of Dirk Vanredsecker, and that he had worked up some apparent proofs of her identity with the child who had been supposed to have perished in the flames.

But that went for nothing, now. If all was true that had lately been developed, Dell Daly, the waif of the West, and the Card Queen of the Silver Seam, was the true heiress, and with a man like Bedrock committed to her interests, it was fair to believe that sooner or later she would get her own.

From the time Primrose glanced over the documents which Honest Pete had secured at the Seam he was convinced she was the missing girl, and that there would be little trouble to prove it. They were the papers which told her name, and that of her parents; papers by whose aid she could prove her identity; but they had told her nothing of the million in the distance, or where she was to look for it. It is doubtful if the knowledge poured into her ear by Bedrock was half as enchanting as the fact that sooner or later she was to be Charlie Fairbanks's wife.

And that was the arrangement made between the man of the Happy-Go-Lucky, and the Lady of the Silver Seam, before they left the mountain pocket.

And the sinner who went with them was not utterly cast down.

"I knew not whose daughter I was," she said, somewhat sadly; "and by a strange coincidence my life has been much like that of Dell Daly's. When Colonel Randall offered to prove to me that I was the daughter of Dirk Vanredsecker, and heiress to a million, I had no objection, provided he could convince the rest of the world at the same time."

"I really began to believe in it. I would have done so altogether, perhaps, if it had not been for the plot against Miss Daly's bank. I helped him in that, of course, but I had no idea there was to be any personal violence. You can be sure I would have drawn the line at personal injury or murder. The prospect ahead does not look very brilliant, but, what of that? I have been stranded more than once, and lit fairly on my feet again. I have always known how to take care of myself, and will keep on doing it to the end of the chapter. When I suspect that I can't—there is a short cut out of the world, and I have the nerve to take it."

Dave Warner looked at her and smiled. It had been something of a shock to learn that she was anything but what she had represented, yet he had already begun to believe

he could pardon all that, and he half fancied she met his smile with something like approval as she turned away.

Having been in such danger together, Dell Daly held little malice, and the facts in the case were never rightly understood in Silverado circles, though it was known, when she assumed control of the Silver Seam, a little later, that the late proprietor was fully satisfied to resign it into her hands.

As for Bandy and his pard, from that day to this no man has ever heard of them as being in the land of the living, but no one of that Silverado party which climbed out of the mountain pocket has ever hinted that they had departed to the land of the dead. Western justice has its mysteries; perhaps their fate is one of these unsolved riddles.

Several times had Uncle Bedrock undertaken to start for the East, and as often had he turned back to follow some promising clue—to checkmate villainy. This time he certainly had made a success of it!

How he produced the Vanredsecker heiress, proved her case, and dropped gracefully into the bosom of his family—no longer Ragged Rufe, the man with the rope, but Horace DeLangdon, capitalist and gentleman of leisure—are matters of history with which at present it is not worth while to deal. Enough to say that if the drop in silver closes the Happy-Go-Lucky Mine, Charlie Fairbanks and his young wife can tide the misfortune over in the happy possession of the Vanredsecker million!

THE END.

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